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Tracy Daugherty

My primary purpose in this thesis is to continue the refocused attention given to American "proletarian" fiction of the 1930's. Because of their politics and supposed artistic inferiority, many of these works have been marginalized by American literary critics. However, many contemporary scholars are reconsidering this genre and devoting more time to studying the insights it offers into understanding the relationship of political ideology to artistic creation, to understanding the history of the Communist Party in the United States, and for the ways in which it contributes to Postmodern cultural studies.

Part One of this thesis is an attempt to recreate the critical ambience that surrounded proletarian fiction by summarizing the literary and political issues that fueled the debates among authors and critics. Contemporaneous and more recent scholarship is considered. The major point of this portion of the thesis is to illustrate the ways in which this literary movement's progression towards its ultimate goal was constrained by its own ideological limits.

Part Two of this thesis is a close rereading of six proletarian novels written in response to the textile worker's strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina, in 1929. The drama of the strike acts as a "control group" of sorts which I have used to

show how different authors approach the same subject matter. The ways in which each author conforms or deviates from the proletarian aesthetic is considered, and a comparative study emerges that illuminates the possibilities and limits of each work and of the Communist ambience that informed them.

This close reading of these six novels sheds light on issues that have not as yet been discussed in any critical forum. In addition, this thesis illustrates the ways in which our sense of identity and political agency is historically conditioned. These findings are relevant to current cultural studies that center on the role of ideology in society. They also provide evidence of how politics affects the writing of history.

The ultimate goal is to provide reasons why proletarian fiction should be reintroduced, more centrally, in American literary studies. Only through a better understanding of the past can we come to understand the present and the future, and how artists and the creative imagination can play central roles in the quest for social justice.

Literary Proletarianism: A Critical Re-Vision of the Gastonia Novels

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I understand that my thesis will become part of the permanent collection of Oregon State University libraries. My signature below authorizes release of my thesis to any reader upon request.

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Jon Nieberding, author

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PREFACE

As it is used in this thesis, the term "proletarian fiction" refers to novels written in the context of the Communist-led cultural movement in the Depression-era United States. While it is possible to extend this term to the dime-novels and serial fiction of the nineteenth century, or to twentieth century works like Jack London's *The Iron Heel* (1908), the height of literary proletarianism was, and is, the 1930's.

During the 1930's, there was considerable debate over a definition of "proletarian" fiction and over a formulation of a distinctly proletarian aesthetic. This debate - never fully resolved - made for a rich ferment in American literary history because of the questions it raised concerning the compatibility of art, politics, and literary form. Many literary critics, both inside and outside the Left, gave these proletarian works considerable treatment in critical essays and in writers' conferences throughout the 1930's. However, most of these focused solely on issues of aesthetics and form, sometimes pushing the subversive content of these proletarian works to the side.

To an extent, literary form is inseparable from its content, so the considerable attention critics gave to it is easily understood. Many critics dismissed the novels outright as didactic polemics devoid of any artistic merit. More sympathetic critics praised proletarian writers for their stylistic innovation and radical messages, and hoped to help formulate a theory of literary form that could solidify the burgeoning movement.

Recently, considerable attention has been refocused on study of 1930's American proletarian fiction, and this thesis, I hope, serves as a continuation of this trend. Proletarian fiction not only offers a look back at radicalism in the 1930's, but also offers insights into the limits of Marxism and Marxist literary theory. In addition, continued attention to literary proletarianism can offer crucial insight into current gender, race, and cultural studies, as well as insights into Postmodern theories of subjectivity.

Part One of this thesis outlines the critical mood that surrounded 1930's proletarian fiction, and traces the Communist influence on American Leftist authors and critics to its roots in early twentieth century Russian literature. While many have argued that CP leaders gave explicit directives concerning proletarian literature, and bullied writers into conformity, it is more useful to think of the Communist influence as an inherited literary consciousness that operates as the premise behind the formal choices an author makes. Still, though, it is obvious that many writers and critics were severely limited by their preoccupation with Communist ideology and a Marxist interpretation of literature.

The contemporaneous debates that surrounded proletarian fiction, as I have said, were mainly concerned with abstract aesthetic theories that tended to direct attention from the content of the novels. One of the underlying presuppositions of this thesis is that the general reader reads primarily for content, and so, while certainly important, form and technique are secondary.

In terms of content, I hope to show that writings can be considered "radical" or "revolutionary" even if they are not explicitly "proletarian" or "Communist." In addition, I hope to continue the trend of recent studies that focus on representational strategies - how the authors actually carried out their political agenda in their work.

Part Two of this thesis is a close rereading of six proletarian novels written in response to the textile workers strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina in 1929. The drama of the strike acts as a "control group" of sorts with which we can see how different authors approach the same subject matter. The ways in which each author and his or her book conforms or deviates from the proletarian literary "norm" is considered, and a comparative study emerges that illuminates the possibilities and limits of each work and of the Communist ambience that informed them.

The analysis of the novels also acknowledges other criticism of the novels and illuminates some issues and themes that have not as yet been discussed in any critical forum. By pointing out these previously ignored issues, I hope to continue the critical attention given to proletarian fiction and to the "Gastonia novels" in particular.

While my perspective is somewhat informed by a Marxist view of history, my goal is to move (as much as possible) away from strictly Leftist interpretations of these novels. While some of the Leftist criticism of these novels is positive and some negative, considering the novels exclusively from this political perspective tends to distort the ways in which these novels might appeal to everyone, regardless of political orientation. Many proletarian novels, including those considered here, have until recently been out of print. My hope is that the trend towards republication will continue, and that critical treatment of the novels will focus less on the debates and philosophical issues of aesthetics that surrounded these novels, and focus more on each novel's content, so as to create a more fully-developed picture of American history, both secular and literary.

LITERARY PROLETARIANISM: A CRITICAL RE-VISION OF THE GASTONIA NOVELS

PART ONE - AMERICAN LITERARY PROLETARIANISM

The collapse of the stock market in 1929 brought with it widespread unemployment, homelessness, and a sense of despair that spread rapidly throughout American society. Subsequently, many artists and intellectuals moved towards the Left and sought radical solutions to the country's problems. But The Great Depression, which instilled in the Left a sense of the urgency of structural and ideological reform, was not the sole impetus for many an artist's move to the Left. The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 established the Communist Party's place in world politics. The United States had for years prior to the Depression a large contingency of Communist Party members and sympathizers. Radical publications like *The Masses, The Liberator,* and *The Daily Worker* sought the creation and dissemination of radical and "proletarian" literature, as a way to promote class-consciousness and also as way to establish a culture that reflected the lives of the working classes and the philosophies of Marxism and Communism. The artistic vision of these publications focused on challenging the status quo, working towards the overthrow of capitalism, and working towards the creation of a working class or "proletarian" culture.

The United States, then, had a history of radicalism in art that preceded the Great Depression and which was based on both a 19th and 20th-century American, Soviet, and German cultural tradition. The highpoint of this radical tradition in American art, though, was during the 1930's. During this time, there was a marked proliferation of proletarian art and artists, and a steadily increasing concern over its artistic vision and direction. This concern gave rise to an increasingly volatile debate spanning the greater part of an intensely political decade. This debate was an extremely complex conversation over the definition of, the proposed direction of, and the aesthetic criteria of a distinctly proletarian cultural movement.

However, the onset of World War II brought changes to the political climate of the United States. Organized labor gradually modified its call for radical structural reform in government and industry. Increasing sectarianism within the Left and in groups like the CPUSA distorted its political vision and increasingly diluted radicalism in the United States.

The rise of the "Affluent Society" and the crush of McCarthyism permeated American society and paralyzed the political clout of the American Left and the CPUSA.

With this came the gradual disappearance of proletarian literature. During its heyday, despite the rich debate over its aesthetics, very little was accomplished in terms of an artistic vision. The idea that this failure can be attributed to a crisis in literary criticism and to political factors like rifts in the CPUSA is not new. In fact, most of the critics, theoreticians, and artists associated with this radical literary movement were aware, even at the movement's pinnacle in the mid-1930's, that increasing sectarianism within the CPUSA and the unending aesthetical debates were creating obstacles that were impeding the movement's development and stifling its potential as a revolutionary force in the United States. Ultimately, their worst fears were realized; proletarian literature was increasingly marginalized and was eventually dropped from the American literary stage.

Still, a legacy remains that has been crucial to understanding the progression of form and style in American literature since the 1930's. Those of and sympathetic to the Left have appreciated proletarian literature for its aesthetic innovations, its examples of alternate literary forms, and the diversity it exhibits through its wide scope of authorship; in essence the period can be seen as one of the highpoints of radicalism in American literature.

The work of proletarian authors and critics of the 1930's has continued value today because of its contributions to current literary theory concerning the discursive strategies of marginalized and minority writers in asserting"selfhood"and constructing identity, an issue taken up in part by Michael Denning in his work on Popular Front culture *The Cultural Front* (1993). Denning finds traces of the proletarian authors' legacy of novelistic representation in "ghetto pastorals" and tenement writing that characterizes post-World War II urban fiction. Current studies of resistance literature and post-colonialism have much to benefit from a re-vision of proletarian literature and from the construction of a new historical model of literary theory and analysis. In addition, historian James Murphy feels that "reconstructing the discussion over aesthetics in the proletarian literature and theater movement can...contribute to an understanding of cultural developments in the thirties as a whole" (Murphy, 3). The renaissance of "labor consciousness" that has gained momentum in the United States in the 1990's provides further reason to study more closely the proletarian cultural tradition of the 1930's.

The purpose of my discussion is to revisit the proletarian artistic "moment" in an effort to reilluminate the debates over the literature's form, its content, and its function as an

instrument in class struggle. By doing this, I hope to work towards the formulation of a new analytic model with which to study the resistance literature among the Left in 1930's America. My own vision is colored by the principle of artistic freedom. Based on the assumption that art is a creative construction and hence a manifestation of any artist's innate sensibility skills, I feel that artists, in creating representations, do choose frames of reference, such as political ideology, but have free license to do so. Since art is a form of communication it is an instrument in class struggle, but it does not serve as a direct "weapon." Art is one of many cultural "tools" and is a psychological, latent affector that is better suited to conveying new sensibilities and helping reorient a reader's vision than to inspiring direct, dramatic action.

Since the debates over proletarian literature centered mainly on the marriage of art to political ideology, it may be useful to have a working definition of ideology. For the purpose of my discussion, ideology is defined as a belief system by which a certain group, in an attempt to assert and maintain group identity and power, explains and justifies ends and means of organized political action. "Ideology" cannot be considered only as a set of ideas that perpetuates the cultural influence of the dominant group in a society; it must also include the belief systems of those groups who seek to reform or destroy the dominant order, and is "powered by an ulterior motive bound up with the legitimization of certain interests in a power struggle" (Eagleton, *Ideology*, 16). This "ulterior" motive in many cases encompasses a conscious desire to deceive, but can also include instances of unintentional self-deception. For example, when a government advocates military intervention in a foreign country, it may mask its intent to, say, secure corporate oil interests in that country, but it may also be self-deceptive in that it rationalizes its military intervention as another battle in the fight for global democracy. This government then does have intent to deceive ideologically, but justifies its means by an idealized end.

This self-deception can be further illustrated by Louis Althusser's concept of the deeper, more subjective manifestations of ideology. As an ideology becomes increasingly naturalized and internalized by a population, it permeates the practical consciousness of men to a point where every action and judgment is placed within its frame of reference. This deep ideology colors the "way in which reality strikes us in the form of apparently spontaneous experience" (Eagleton, *Ideology,* 18). This deeper affective characteristic of ideology has particular relevance as we examine more cultural manifestations of ideology in literature.

Part of the Depression-era Marxist critic's measure of a proletarian artist's craftsmanship was the author's skill in weaving explicit ideological messages in with a character's humanity and psychology. This was a difficult marriage of art to ideology. In many cases, characters in a proletarian novel served only as pretext for ideological discussion. They became interchangeable mouthpieces that diluted characterization in a novel, and for the Marxist, became false or "undialectical " representations. This weakness is what Georg Lukacs termed "tendenz" or tendentiousness, and in most instances it resulted in what he felt were false historical accounts of the progression of the proletariat. This was the main theoretical issue of the international debates over proletarian literature, and came under particular scrutiny in Europe, the Soviet Union, and in the United States in the years between the World Wars.

The aforementioned political rifts and lack of consistent artistic vision are the most commonly asserted reasons for the disappearance of proletarian literature. Typically, historians have characterized the issue as a problem easily traced to the poor aesthetic quality in the literature itself and to problems within the CPUSA. Leo Gurko (*The Angry Decade,* 1947) and Richard Pells (*Radical Visions, American Dreams*, 1973), among others, essentially argue that the presence of dogmatism in Party attitudes toward the literature and in the literature itself stifled any artistic merit the literature might have had. Most historians of the subject, including Malcolm Cowley (*Dream of the Golden Mountains,* 1964) and James Gilbert (*Writers and Partisans,* 1968) feel that the "literature was always viewed in relation to politics and never particularly prized for itself" (Gilbert, 103).

Others, like James Murphy and Barbara Foley, feel the issue is more complex than this and calls for reconsideration. In *Radical Representations* (1993) Foley rejects the idea that the decline of proletarian literature is attributable solely to issues of aesthetics and Party dogmatism and seeks scholarship that moves beyond these discussions. Murphy argues in his book *The Proletarian Moment* (1991) that proletarian literature "remains relevant because of the way it has been approached up to now," implying that scholarship to this point is "a classic example of how politics affect the writing of history...the distortion and misrepresentation that have resulted can only be described as an indictment of much of American scholarship in this area" (Murphy, 5). These historians'depictions have served as a much needed revival of scholarship on the proletarian cultural movement of the 1930's.

In general, Marxist literary critics of the 1930's may have misinterpreted their own role in the revolutionary movement. The aesthetic vision they attempted to crystallize was

metaphysically based on orthodox Marxism, to the rigid exclusion of other perspectives and influences from which the proletarian artist may have benefited. Orthodox Marxism places as the site of transcendental Truth the subject position of the "worker." In the context of class struggle, the basic tenet of Marxism is that the working class will overthrow the capitalist regime and establish itself as the dictatorial class and thus cease to be, at least in the terms in which it once defined itself. This would be an "end" to history, so to speak - a telos for Marxists - and served as a sort of metaphysic around which their entire frame of reference was constructed. Their grand narrative established the worker's subject position at the top of their hierarchy of historical agents, which led to an essentializing ethos on both the object of study (literature) and in the framework they felt should guide and shape it (criticism).

It could be argued that their position as Leftist intellectuals essentially took critics out of the working-class and placed them on-par with a petty-bourgeoisie. Since most of these critics avocated a proletarian literature by, for, and about the working class, it is puzzling that they failed to mention that they were somewhat removed from the class they wanted to represent. While this may seem like too much hair-splitting, it is an example of the confusion that surrounded the movement. Is the proletariat defined by its relation to the means of production, or is it defined in terms of culture and education?

While this issue, like many others, went unresolved, most of these critics felt that their role in the revolutionary movement was crucial. Philip Rahv, arguably one of the most important Marxist literary critics of his time and literary editor of *The Partisan Review*, stated his thoughts on the critic's role in a symposium in the pages of the April-May 1935 issue: "...criticism is in the main a form of conceptual analysis...its effect is a slow one, in that in *influencing actual creation as well as popularizations of thought* [italics mine], it reaches its mass audience in indirect form...if literature is a weapon in life, criticism is a weapon in literature" (Rahv, 17). Rahv is, in the main, correct, but I would argue that he overemphasizes the critic's role. The critic's job is to analyze and interpret literature, not prescribe artistic guidelines or criteria. As Terry Eagleton and Jacques Derrida have noted, any particular political emphasis in literary criticism quickly tends toward overemphasis. Eagleton, in his work *Ideology: An Introduction* (1991), states that "Marxist intellectuals trade in ideas, and so are chronically likely to overrate their importance in society as a whole" (Eagleton, 36).

Perhaps it would be helpful to reevaluate the tone of Marxist literary criticism of proletarian fiction, in order to shed some light on what seems to be the root of dissent over the issue. Much has been said regarding the *style* of criticism, of the endless debates over its

application, and of the vastly different manifestations of political motivation present, but very little has been said of the *place* of criticism, or whether or not the theoreticians correctly ascertained their role within the proletarian movement, or how critics tended to place themselves in a position above the art and artist and essentially created for themselves a privileged position of seemingly greater importance than the art itself. As Eagleton has reminded us, "it is the object, not the method, which distinguishes and delimits the discourse" (Eagleton, *Theory,* 197). Without art, a critic does not exist. Let artists guide artistic movements.

The debate over a theory of proletarian aesthetics can be separated into four main issues. The most central and problematic issue centered on the marriage of an "appropriate" Marxist ideology to art. Was the message of the proletarian aesthetic to be applied explicitly, as a type of didactic tool, in order to fully and overtly state the work's "purpose" and the author's vision for the future? Or should the message of the author and of Marxism be implicit, and manifest only through the shaping of characters, moods, settings, and denouement? In proletarian art, since there is a specific goal in mind, this question cuts to the very heart of the revolutionary value of literature and to an author's role in the movement and raises the issue of art's cultural function and its affective qualities. A second but closely related issue that hinges on a work's specific content is the form that gives the content its coherence and structure. Do revolutionary times call for revolutionary forms?

The third issue centered on whether the novel, a development of bourgeois culture and a typically "individualistic" mode of expression, was compatible with the collective goals and sentiment of the proletariat. The critics and authors of this movement argued almost incessantly over the political potentialities of the novel as a revolutionary format, which led to important discussions over the question of traditional forms and modes of artistic expression. Should the work of fellow-travelers (authors sympathetic to but not directly aligned with the Communist Party) be included in the revolutionary canon and serve as inspiration or as models to the budding revolutionary artist, or should they be rejected in favor of a purely proletarian culture and sensibility? Along with these issues arose a fourth: the question of historical truth, of how to represent the future and progression of the proletarian culture, and of the tension between "realism" and Modernism. All of the issues were vehemently debated in the pages of *Partisan Review, The New Masses,* and in conferences and symposiums throughout the 1930's.

The Soviet Influence

To understand these questions it would be prudent to first take a look at how very similar debates arose in the Soviet Union after 1917. This is not to negate the importance of the tradition of literary and cultural forms of social protest brought to America by Irish, German, and Southern European immigrants (to name a few), or to disregard the influence that 19th-century American dime-novels, radical song-poems, or authors like Jack London and his book *The Iron Heel* had on American literary radicalism in the 1930's. However, since the proletarian literature of this time was predominantly associated with the Communist Party and its literary arms like *The Partisan Review, The New Masses,* and the John Reed Clubs, and since the predominant mode of criticism was Marxism, the roots of the debate must be sought in the Soviet Union.

Of key importance to the Soviet proletarian culture was the Proletkult, a group established by the Society of Proletarian Arts in 1917 and which had its roots in the Lenin-sponsored publication *Pravda* (Murphy, 22). The group's function was to guide the development of a new culture that celebrated the victory of 1917 and which also had its eyes focused on development and protection for the future. Culture was to the Proletkult as important as economics. The continued civil war necessitated continued discussion of the idea of a proletarian culture that would help solidify the ostensible class dictatorship.

The Proletkult, which predominantly (but not exclusively) concerned itself with theater and the visual arts, advocated a spiritual revolution, a type of "revolutionary romanticism" that found its inspiration in the 19th-century Russian and European classics (Malley, 136). The overarching philosophy of the movement was a Marxist utopian vision of a society of the future that had its development in the socio-economic struggle of the past and present. Some of the journals established by the Proletkult exemplify this vision: in Petrograd, *The Future;* in Kharkov, *The Dawn of the Future*; and in Tambov, *Culture of the Future* (Malley, xxvii). The Proletkult established studios to educate artists on the finer points of Marxist philosophy and generally extended its influence to most of the artists in the Soviet Union.

Central to the philosophy of the Proletkult and to its advocacy of a spiritual revolution in art was its reliance on the "bourgeois" literary tradition in the novel and in poetry. The Proletkult subscribed to the idea that all people were embroiled in a socio-

economic struggle. Thus, the individualism characteristic of "bourgeois" literature could indeed express the collective will, because in a sense, the universality of this socio-economic phenomenon made it possible for people to see their existence in the writings of others, as something sewn into the very fabric of their being. The only requirement was that this "imaginative" literature somehow depict the struggle against capitalism, or even better, show definitive sympathy towards the sentiment of the Communist Party. The latter of these two was not a necessary or direct requirement; in fact, many felt the strength of this type of literature was that its authors were generally indifferent to politics and had " no axe to grind and could therefore resist incursions from their conscious or subjective selves wherein ideology lodged" (Maguire, 230).

From this presence of the bourgeois influence in Soviet proletarian culture in the early 1920's arose a conflict that became central to both Soviet and American debates over proletarian literature. The issue was the idea that revolutionary times necessitated the advocacy, development, and employment of new literary forms. Bertold Brecht, a champion of this idea, said, "Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change" (Foley, 312). Since the proletariat was attempting a clean break from capitalist influence and sought to establish a new culture "of the future," critics felt all old traditions and influences must be rejected in favor of new forms that clearly and empirically sought to further the cause of the proletariat. Others felt, furthermore, that since the novel was a form of bourgeois individualism, it was fundamentally opposed to proletarian aims to establish a collective consciousness. The old hegemony must be dissolved and a new one contrary to the old must be established.

Writers' unions like the Russian Association of Proletarian Writers (RAPP) took up the role of championing proletarian literature as the Proletkult increasingly turned its attention to collective theater. The RAPP criticized independent "bourgeois intellectuals" and sought innovative literature that incorporated Party ideology and class visions of the future. The main journal of the RAPP (there were many) was *The Foundry*, which sought to extend opportunities to develop the proletariat's creative ability (Malley, 154). Another important group was the Left Front of Arts (LEF) which paralleled RAPP's advocacy of new forms and published journals that created significant impact throughout the Soviet Union. The LEF, like RAPP, sought to include all of the proletariat in the literary movement; they invited anyone and everyone to contribute to the journals and felt disdain for notions of authorial genius and elitism in the artistic world. These groups created the journals to provide

mediums for publication of proletarian literature of all kinds. The editors of these journals placed sometimes weak or more polemical authors and works in a specific context that helped mask individual shortcomings, and which showed the collective nature of their mission (Maguire, 68). The editors also felt the bourgeois influence on the Proletkult had manifested itself in art that was grandiose and Utopian; to combat this they continued to favor literary "realism," industrial "sketches" (short, simply conceived autobiographical narratives that depicted factory life, for example) and innovations of form. Conflicts and contradictions arose in the face of these calls for a new literary hegemony. Debates, like the Kharkov Conference (where Lukacs expounded his theory of "tendentiousness"), increased in frequency and vehemence. Central to this idea of innovation in literature for the Marxist was that because of continual change, real art was progressive and futuristic. To adhere to the present was to "arrest all motion"; real life will have passed by and the author will be left with the "fossilized remains" (Maguire, 190). However, many of the aesthetic directives called for simple, straightforward, and factual styles that evoked a sense of immediate environmental description (setting) - one aspect of "realism," which can be defined simply as an attempt to convey plausible and everyday modes of experience. More contradictions arose as critics sought to clarify the debate by defining, in a Marxist way, just what a proletarian work of literature was.

This idea of definition necessitates discussion of three important figures: Leon Trotsky, Alexander Voronskii (editor of the fringe journal *Red Virgin Soil*) and Alexander Bogdanov, who led the group Vrped ("Forward") which, along with *Pravda,* helped create the Proletkult. Bogdanov had split with the Bolsheviks in 1905 (Murphy, 23) and developed ideas firmly rooted in the values of classical literature; his was essentially a moderate view of what should define and influence proletarian literature. Bogdanov stressed the importance of a novel's content over its form and felt that new, innovative forms would emerge naturally as a result of revolutionary content (Malley, 146). This idea stressed the natural progression of culture; his criticism suggests that Bogdanov advocated the use of all forms because they had at least some value - aesthetically, formally, or ideologically - as models or influences for proletarian writers. It is also apparent, through his advocacy of the idea of a more natural and organic progression of culture, that Bogdanov felt that forced or conscripted literary innovation, in the form of literary standards or formulas, was inherently artificial and therefore not a true expression of life or natural progress and conflict. In other words,

literature created under these conscriptions would tend to be somewhat undialectical in execution.

Trotsky contributed much to the body of proletarian literature with his work *Literature and Revolution* (1924). In a way, Trotsky's ideas preclude definitions of proletarian literature. He felt that proletarian culture could never exist "because the proletarian regime is temporary and transient. The historic significance...is laying the foundations of a culture that is above classes" (14). Since revolution was imminent, all literature was in a sense pre-revolutionary. Trotsky felt the proletariat should concentrate upon destroying the old order, not building a new and inherently artificial one before its time. When the proletariat reached the pinnacle of its power, Trotsky argued, "it will be more and more dissolved into a Socialist community and will free itself from its class characteristics and thus cease to be the proletariat" (15). He preferred to call this literature revolutionary rather than proletarian, a broader vision that welcomed all forms, including those of the bourgeoisie: " a new class cannot move forward without regard to the most important landmarks of the past" (226). Moreover, he did not believe that only the workers could create revolutionary art. He felt, as did Voronskii, that the proletarian moment was insufficient to establish a real proletarian culture, hence their acceptance of all "fellow travelers" sympathetic to the Marxist line and to the breakdown of capitalism. The proletariat should preserve its time and strength for political revolution; "art must make its own ways and means" (218). Trotsky, and later Voronskii felt that since the proletariat was essentially uneducated aesthetically, it should embrace classical artists like Tolstoy, Shakespeare, and others so as to acquaint itself with a more "complex idea of human personality, of its passions and feelings, a deeper and profounder understanding of its psychic forces" (225). Trotsky warned of the dangers of increased state control over art and felt the party must protect art, not direct it: "It is impossible to reduce this policy [towards art] to one formula, to something short like a bird's bill...Nor is it necessary" (227). However, given the escalation of the debates over the bourgeois tradition and the Soviet government's feeling that the proletariat needed strict guidelines for the formation of proletarian culture, the state exercised considerable influence on the direction of Soviet proletarian literature towards the end of the 1920's.

Trotsky shunned party directives over the artist and advocated complete freedom for art. He felt that an artist has a frame of reference, a circumference, but true art conforms only to expression. Art is true in that it conforms to no particular Truth. Art, to Trotsky, lives

according to its own interior laws and the author has the inalienable right to "free choice of themes and...absence of all restrictions on the range of his exploitations" (*OLA*, 120). He also agreed with the idea of literature's latent, implicit effect on the reader, and therefore felt it needed to remain true only to history, not to a particular framework; a literary work is truthful or artistic when the interrelation of the heroes develop, not according to the author's desires, but according to the latent forces of character and setting. Above all, Trotsky felt artists could best serve the revolution by struggling for artistic truth "not in terms of any single school, but in terms of the immutable faith of the artist in his own inner self" (*OLA*, 124). Without this, there is no art.

Prior to 1925, the Communist Party in the Soviet Union was only concerned that the fellow travelers who influenced or participated in this cultural and political movement be loyal to the vision of the Party. However, as time progressed, and as a result of the influence of "imaginative" literature (a term first coined by Lenin) on the proletarian writers, the distinction between "bourgeois" and "proletarian" literature blurred. Some Marxist critics within the writers' unions and among the political circles came to see all literature as an extension of politics. The Twelfth Congress (1923) convened to discuss these matters and decided that "in view of the fact that in the last two years imaginative literature has grown into a major artistic force...it is essential that the Party should place on the agenda the question of guiding" (Maguire, 422). The following year, the language employed in the Party line at the Thirteenth Congress escalated somewhat to call for "fullest possible Party interpretation of models of imaginative literature." Finally, a year later came the decree for a "literature actually created by Party conscription" (Maguire, 423).

Historian Lynn Malley argues in *Culture of the Future* (1990) that hostility towards the Proletkult by the Party and by union organizers was due to resentment of Proletkult funding and general suspicion of the group's loyalty to the Party line. Militant Octoberist groups like Smithy, which formed *The Worker's Journal,* continued the denouncement of fellow travelers, whom they felt usurped space in publications deserved by proletarian authors. The fellow travelers were consistently paid more and were patronized by the editors of Proletkult journals (Maguire, 163). In order to organize the class towards its specific revolutionary goals, Octoberists and other CP leaders sought to banish all fringe groups because they hindered development and establishment of a distinctly proletarian hegemony (Malley, 211). Such was the language of the 1932 CP directive "On the Restructuring of Literary and Artistic Organizations" which denounced the sectarian "eclecticism" of the

Proletkult journals and sought creation of a systematic (and controllable) aesthetic. Thus the state ultimately took control of the direction of proletarian literature.

Prior to state interference in the literary circles, the Soviets enjoyed a flourish of new literature that, while based firmly in the tradition of past literary classicists, had a clear vision of the future of a socialist culture. However, increasing debate and continued incursion of Party directives on the creative process tended to dilute the quality of the art and generally stifled the progression of new cultural forms.

The debate in the Soviet Union, then, can be seen as one influence on the temper of the American debates over proletarian literature. This Soviet legacy influenced a number of distinctly proletarian literary devices. For example, many American writers employed "mentor" figures, who served as characters' introductions to Communist thought. These mentors functioned in typically paradigmatic plots that fetishized working-class origins. Many of these proletarian works showed no character development past "joining up" with the CP; all the difficulties characters may have encountered, or would have encountered, are almost magically resolved once these characters become Communists. In general, the tone of much of 1930's American proletarian fiction is one of idealistic optimism in the power of the working class to instigate social revolution.

However, this is not to imply that given CPUSA influence on American writers, the Soviets tendered explicit literary directives; rather, the influence was more of suggestion (Foley, 123). Barbara Foley rejects the idea that proletarian literature was ruined solely by forced aesthetical directives and formulas that reduced the quality of writing so much that it dropped from the literary scene because of its inferior "quality" (201). Examination of contemporary criticism generally shows favorable reactions to the literature. Still, as the proletarian literary movement gained momentum during the Great Depression, debates over definitions, over applications of criticism, and over the compatibility of politics and art (by such mainstream publications as *The New York Times Book Review*) gained significant force as the Depression deepened and more and more people became sympathetic to the American Left and to proletarian literature.

On the whole, in the first half of the 1930's, leftist editors, publications, and artists were dedicated to the literature, to revolutionary ideology, and to the creation of venues to give voice to the unknown workers from the disenfranchised classes. The latter half of the decade brought renewed emphasis on the creation of a people's democratic literature (a more

moderate stance, as a result of increasing anti-Stalinism), antifascist ideology, and the development of organizations and conferences (Wald, 24).

The American Proletarian Aesthetic

Two of the most important groups were those authors and critics of *The Partisan Review* and *The New Masses. The New Masses* was a renewal of a publication that reached its height during the World War I years. This magazine, *The Masses,* was edited by radical poet and theoretician Max Eastman and was published from 1913-17, until internal rifts and external influences forced it into the ground. The U.S. Postal Service, through various tactics, made circulation of the journal virtually impossible (Robbins, 1). Anti-radical sentiment in the general population had its effect as well. In 1918, Eastman returned briefly with *The Liberator,* another proletarian/revolutionary publication which quickly disappeared. It wasn't until the rise of Mike Gold and Granville Hicks that *The New Masses* really established itself as a critical and artistic venue for proletarian literature.

Mike Gold became well-known both for his fiction *(Jews Without Money)* and for his aesthetic formula, which appeared in the September 1930 edition of *The New Masses.* The formula was a step-by-step directive for the formation of a proletarian literary aesthetic. This very hard-line (and as some perceived, Stalinist) view paints a picture of Gold that many historians have used against him. These historians use the charge of dogmatism to advance their idea that conscripted aesthetics and formulaic writing killed the movement. Certainly Gold and the proletarian movement are more complex than that; however it is not the goal of this thesis to outline all of the historical factors that contributed to the extinction of proletarian literature. Gold was sometimes very dogmatic and exclusionary in his criticism, and was sometimes more moderate; he seemed to tailor his thoughts according to what he felt the movement needed at a given time. Still, his inconsistency is a window into a larger problem. An overview of the of criticism suggests that the debates over the rejection or acceptance of influence from writers outside of the proletarian or CP circle, concerns over a working definition of "proletarian" literature, and questions of literary form may have, in general, so confused the movement that it was paralyzed to the point of impotence. The majority of this confusion can be traced to the essentializing ethos of many of the Marxist critics, and their penchant for a narrow, exclusionary view of historical "truth" and revolutionary literature.

Gold was an advocate of revolutionary forms like the narrative sketch (originally an innovation of the Proletkult in the early 1920's) and the fictional autobiography, a form Gold felt could relate episodically "wide ranging sketches of societal oppression"(Foley, 400). Through this form, and the narrative sketch, Gold felt that a portrait of individual socio-economic struggle could connote the collective class experience of the proletariat. The goal was not only to construct a new class identity, but also to find the literary means with which to assert it. This call to action, Gold argued, would solidify a quality distinctive to proletarian literature: the perception of the power of personal agency. Gold was hesitant to accept totally the bourgeois literary tradition (he held particular disdain for the likes of Henry James and Marcel Proust) and its perceived self-indulgence. Gold thought that by taking on revolutionary subjects, proletarian literature combated bourgeois tendencies. Some of the bourgeois writers, especially those considered Modernists, had much to offer in terms of points of view, attention to detail, and textual richness. Modernism, particularly Joyce, was not so much characterized by different forms of expression (like the novel, or poetry) but by different *styles* of expression (you might say, expression for expression's sake). He felt proletarian authors could learn better observational skills but remained guarded against what he felt was the bourgeois tendency to "dissolve the purity of the proletarian ethos in fiction" (Foley, 402). In other words, the bourgeois influence was to some degree useful in terms of inspiration, but the proletarian fiction risked corruption by too much direct use of bourgeois literary devices. In hindsight, it seems that perhaps Gold failed to realize that the call to action has to appeal to individuals. Groups are comprised of individual subjects, all of whom respond to politics in a different way: as a worker, as an American, as a Socialist, as a father, a mother, and on through the range of subjectivities that comprise our society. To completely reject individualism is to reject the psychology and the textual richness of culture that can be manifest in a work of art, and which could be instrumental in re-orienting the mindsets of a population towards a new Socialist sensibility.

Granville Hicks was the literary editor of *The New Masses* in the 1930's. Hick's philosophy, simply put, was based on a Marxist view of history and a more moderate, less exclusionary view of what could advance proletarian culture than that of many of his contemporaries. Hicks, like Gold, felt that by taking on revolutionary subjects, proletarian literature combated bourgeois tendencies. He felt some bourgeois writers, particularly Modernists, had much to offer in terms of points of view, attention to detail, and textual richness. While in his essay "Revolution and the Novel" (1934), Hicks stated that there was a

"fundamental dependence of literature on the economic organization of society," (9) he recognized that variations and complexities of this axiom were possible and so welcomed contributions from any source that dealt with the destruction of or disillusionment with capitalism. However, there are some examples of essentializing in Hick's criticism, particularly in his notion of "authenticity," which he defined as"correspondence to the best documentary evidence about a period in question as interpreted by a Marxist theory of history" (22), or his thoughts on the subject matter and point of view of an author: " a revolutionary writer's aim is limited to the outlook and needs of the proletariat" (64). A more explicit example occurs later in the same passage: "the philosophy of Communism is broader than any philosophy the bourgeoisie has evolved. The sympathies of the Communist are more inclusive...And the idea of Communism can broaden and grow whereas the ideas and attitudes of liberalism are bound to shrivel in the violent heat of capitalism's last struggle" (64).

As we can see, Hick's message is somewhat contradictory. However, he did (at times) seem to celebrate all forms of literature because they helped to contribute to the construction of class consciousness and the proletarian ethos. He felt the novel was a form unjustly criticized: "the novel's only tradition is that of complete freedom...the novel is not a form, but a term that lends itself to many purposes and points of view" (21). He felt, in addition, that method was not of transcendent importance because he felt most people read primarily for content, and not for execution. Hicks felt that literature had "a different sort of effect, subtler, deeper, and more permanent" (9) and that a work should represent the "deepest recesses of individuality and at the same time...exhibit that individuality as essentially a social phenomenon" (65). We can see from Hicks that the criticism and the art that was its duty to analyze spawned a theory of aesthetics that anticipated much of what is happening in modern literary theory today, namely the idea that subjectivity is a social construction. We also see the weaknesses of their movement and the fact that its artistic vision never really crystallized.

Art and The Rhetoric of Ideology

This notion of ideology and its relationship to art was a recurring argument throughout the 1930's. Critics outside the Left especially engaged in this debate. Critic Robert G. Davis felt that politics had no place at all in literature and tended to reduce art to propaganda. Furthermore, he believed that politics itself made one unable to appreciate imaginative literature on any meaningful level. Others felt that formulaic writing (in keeping

with Gold's formula) reduced the credibility of the entire American literary tradition. J.D. Adams of *The New York Times Book Review* argued against politics and in particular, the politics of the "collective" novel, a form advocated by both Hicks and Gold. Adams contended that to try to achieve collectivity through the novel was a paradox of form; he felt that "individualism is the lifeblood of art" and when novels "go" collective, they dilute reality and therefore the beauty and truth of art (Foley, 419). Marxist Georg Lukacs argued in *The Historical Novel* (1937) that "socialist realism tends to dichotomize," which meant that it tended to focus solely on the side of the proletariat. He felt the realist author (the typical proletarian author) chooses one side of the dichotomy and thus renders his or her work an undialectical polemic, an example of his concept of "tendentiousness." Lukacs argued that art and ideology could mix if properly balanced and that the goal, particularly for the Marxist, was to represent history as truthfully as possible. This concern over the compatibility of art, politics, and ideology was the topic of the Linskurv debates (1931-32) in Germany, to which Lukacs was a major contributor. It was here and in his work *History and Class-Consciousness* that Lukacs discussed "tendentiousness," and also his concept of "parteilichkeit," his term for the proletariat, the class he felt to be the vehicle of historical progress. From this we can see that, like Hicks, and a majority of the other Marxist theorists, Lukacs' defense of the proletariat as the site of historical Truth colors his perception of things, and allows him to fall prey to the very ethos he attempted to combat – tendentiousness.

Lukacs was a member of the IURW (International Union of Revolutionary Writers) and his group, along with the Bund proletarisch-revolutioarer Schrifstellar (BPRS), another writers' union, was deeply involved in the very same debates that characterized the Soviet and American tradition in proletarian literature. In depicting revolution in a novel or some other form, Lukacs argued that this depiction should not appear a-historical. Therefore, a particular historical period should be described as a means of evolution, as a step in the evolutionary path. Without this recognition and its depiction in literature, true evolution is impossible to think of and impossible to manifest. Lukacs' criticism tends to exclude much of proletarian literature from what is considered "good" in the eyes of the Marxist because it is often heavy-handed ideologically and offers incomplete or otherwise unsatisfactory portraits of socio-economic struggle.

Granville Hicks and another important figure in these debates, Philip Rahv, felt that some critics applied their Marxist critique without sensitivity to the complexity of literature

and consequently reduced much of their own work to sociological analysis. These limitations, these two critics argued, not only affected theorists but authors as well. Hicks argued that if an author "does one thing well, that is better than doing several things badly," and furthermore, "we salvage what we can and are grateful" (Hicks, 63). Hicks noted, importantly, that in a sense, no one could argue against the presence of politics in novels because there was no way to achieve objective truth. He felt class struggle was so inclusive that to separate the political from the artistic was impossible, and any attempt to do so would weaken the literature. Therefore, Hicks argued, an author must embrace his or her experience, even if its manifestation in literature was polemical or ideological: "partisanship ought to enrich one's understanding of enemies and friends alike" (Hicks, 58).

Philip Rahv brought many of these issues to the fore in his essay "Proletarian Literature: A Political Autopsy" (1939). Rahv was the leading critic of *Partisan Review,* which by its status as the literary arm of the New York John Reed Club, the largest Communist group in the country, had a decisive impact on charting the course and maintaining the guidelines of American proletarian literature. Rahv and *Partisan Review* are central to historical analyses concerning the culture of the 1930's and 40's such as Alan Wald's *The New York Intellectuals* (1987), Alexander Bloom's *Prodigal Son's* (1986), and Terry Cooney's *The Rise of the New York Intellectuals* (1986).

While not criticizing the genre of proletarian literature per se, Rahv pointed out the limitations of his Marxist contemporaries in criticism and fiction. Rahv felt that proletarian literature, particularly the novel, emerged as "the ideal carrier of fictions, incantations in verse, and critical manifestoes" (Rahv, 295). However, because of limited interpretations of Marxism, Rahv felt, those who tried to guide and shape revolutionary literature in effect reduced it to the mere ideology of the CP, "which for its own sake has fused the concepts of party and ideas" (295). Writers and, more importantly, their art were compromised, and subsequently they rendered incomplete and politically impotent writing characterized by its homogeneity. Rahv did advocate Marxist interpretations of society as a basis for creative fiction, but felt that the debates that were intended to clarify the artistic vision conversely resulted in a "mystification" that led to an author's complete surrender to the CP. This loss of individuality and fresh creative insight debilitated the movement and the artistic value of the literature.

Rahv felt that the continued use of proletarian literature as an "administrative tool" of the CP effectively ruined any claims to artistic merit the authors might have staked. The

shortcomings, according to Rahv, were not found in the employment of politics as literary device, or in descriptions of strictly working class sensibilities; in fact, he championed class-specific literature and its diversity. The problems arose for Rahv when the interests of the Party precluded the expression of the art and thus produced "an internationally uniform literature...whose main service was the carrying out of party assignments" (Rahv, 297). The inherent limitations of party directives on the literature had the effect of a "literature of a party disguised as the literature of a class" (300). This narrowness eliminated any claims the writing had to being "true" literature because the "spiritual and artistic superstructure" needed was not present in the texts.

From this denunciation of the party directives concerning proletarian literature, Rahv moves on to ponder even the possibility of a strictly proletarian literature, because like Trotsky he felt "a class which has no culture of its own can have no literature either...the working class is a cultural consumer that has neither the means nor the consciousness necessary for cultural differentiation" (298). This suggests that Rahv too distinguished between revolutionary and proletarian literature, regarding the former as having more potential than the latter. Rahv was without a doubt a Marxist critic, but he felt that until revolution succeeded, any attempt to establish a proletarian culture before its time was doomed from the start. This idea, coupled with his disdain for party control over working-class literature, led him to believe that "proletarian literature as a whole followed the Party in predicting and celebrating a victory of a revolution in a period when it was actually losing every battle" (300).

Rahv, even more than Hicks, seems to argue that the artist and the effect his or her art evokes are decidedly more important than any party guidelines, directives, or aesthetic formulas; in fact, despite his alliance with Marxism, he tended to criticize any imposition of party authority over the creative process. Truly revolutionary literature, he felt, could not be created by adherence to a formula. To be sure, Rahv suggests that even class consciousness was not enough to warrant classification of literature as "revolutionary" or "proletarian"-it needed to have a sound philosophical framework and a finished Marxist outlook. Rahv felt that Marxist criticism of the time isolated "the political equivalents of books from their total contexts" and that critics remained insistent "on elementary political lessons that should be taken for granted by this time" (Rahv, *Criticism,*16). The instability of the critical arena at this time suggests the limitations of much of Marxist criticism that surfaced in the 1930's.

As the 1930's progressed, conferences were organized amongst American writers as one strategy with which they could hopefully overcome the stumbling blocks impeding the movement. They still focused on defining proletarian literature, discussing modes of representation and characterization, and in general, maintained focus on the difficult assimilation of art and propaganda.

In 1935, Kenneth Burke delivered a paper to the American Writer's Congress entitled "Revolutionary Symbolism." In this address, Burke proposes the employment of a new symbol, "the people," as opposed to the distinctly proletarian symbol, "the worker," that most critics and artists of the genre felt absolutely necessary to employ. Burke assumes that writings in this arena of struggle (the class struggle), a struggle between competing constructions of reality, are necessarily rhetoricized and stylized in a certain way. Propaganda is employed on both sides of the struggle. Resistance is a deviation from the norm, but we can only gauge its "value" or effectiveness in the larger context. Inasmuch as the proletarian author has a particular end in mind, he or she is a propagandist. For Burke, the propagandistic qualities of a work of art are not necessarily incongruent with its artistic expression and it is not entirely crucial to divorce a political message from a work of art. From this standpoint, Burke argues that the symbol of "the worker" as the subject of history evokes our sympathies, but not the ideal the proletarian movement seeks to attain.

Burke recognizes that this arena of struggle invokes rhetoric and propaganda. Therefore, the better the propaganda, the better the form of artistic cultural resistance. According to Burke, "myth" and "symbol" were important aspects of propaganda. This myth (encompassed in the constitution of the symbol) is a "social tool for welding the sense of interrelationship by which...[people] can work together for common social ends" (87). Given that proletarian artists typically employed a "utopian," or at least optimistic method of closure, Burke argues that the symbol, the guiding ethos of their art of resistance, must illuminate the proletarian artists' common goal. Burke does not seek to abandon the symbol of the worker, because it is in this constitution of subject that "the worst features of capitalist exploitation are focused," but he does hope to help the proletarian author to recognize the power of rhetoric and show that a positive symbol, a symbol that would be the most widely appealing across a wide audience, is in the end a more effective means of propaganda.

People prioritize in order to make a decision. Given everyone's differently constructed "subjectivity," different people would respond to different appeals. In terms of propaganda, it would be wise to assume as inclusive a stance as possible so as to reach the

widest possible audience. Burke says: "the complete propagandist, it seems to me, would take an interest in as many imaginative, aesthetic, and speculative fields as he can handle, and into this breadth of concerns he would interweave a general attitude of sympathy for the oppressed and antipathy towards our oppressive institutions" (91).

These debates over aesthetics mostly concerned the marriage of art to politics, while remaining both true to the art and to the ideology. The question of propaganda, then, was an important one to these artists. Burke addresses this question: "in the truly imaginative field, the author's best contribution to the cause is implicit" (90). He realizes there is a time for more explicit propaganda, but feels that work is restricted to the organizer and pamphleteer. In addition, the proletarian aesthetic involves not only the revolutionary content and its use, but also raises a question as to how the content is expressed, and in what tone. Overt propaganda, particularly in asserting the symbol of the revolutionary worker, relies too heavily on a rhetoric of exclusion and tends to place emphasis on antithetical tactics. Since the writer's job is "to convince the unconvinced" he or she must not place emphasis too soon on what Burke terms "antagonistic modes" of writing. Instead, a more inclusive stance should be taken employing "[the people's] vocabulary, their values, their symbols, insofar as this is possible" (92).

If indeed a classless society was the goal of both the artist and critic, Burke's symbol of "the people" would have been the most idealistic and the most inclusive. The elimination of class distinctions in the art would have perhaps fostered a broader identification with the symbol of "the people" and therefore enlisted a broader allegiance. The failure of the Communist revolution in the United States is not a result of the failings of American proletarian fiction. There are many aspects of the genre that can be studied so as to reilluminate first our perception and depiction of American culture in the 1930's and secondly, how this revision can help us to understand American literature and culture into the next millennium.

As Burke noted then, and as we should recognize now, revolution is no time for hair-splitting. A comprehensive vision must be established as an orientation towards revolutionary action. We assemble the nuts and bolts that each proletarian work of art offers and use it to construct class-consciousness and revolutionary sentiment. The spirit, or substance, of Burke's symbol is an ethos that attempts, inasmuch as it is possible, to appeal to as broad a range of subjectivities as possible. Burke's symbol, if accepted, could have had a rhetorical effect of encapsulating the very spirit of the American ideal - democracy. This point would

have been laughed out of the conversation (and still would be); to some extent, the ideals of the Constitution have been manipulated and exploited enough to bring about social strife in the 1930's as well as the present. However, this "American" spirit of democracy, "the people," combines a multiplicity of subjectivities that represents, in the words of Edward Said, the "hybrid" nature of our subject positions and of our culture.

Part of the argument here is that Marxist critics and artists essentialized the subject position of the worker, and thereby employed a symbol and critique exclusive and dogmatic, rather than inclusive and conducive to knowledge. It could be argued (and was in the past, most notably by the worker-writer Jack Conroy) that Burke's proposal is a type of essentialization, in that he privileges the ideals of populism and of American constitutional democracy that parallel the very attitudes of the bourgeoisie the proletarian artistic movement sought to overturn. Burke's proposal was vehemently critiqued by the audience at the Writer's Congress, who felt that his ideas were far from the socialist vision they wanted to create. I would argue for Burke; if one of the goals of proletarian fiction is to spread a socialist message in a society where such ideas do not have wide acceptance, it would be at least worthwhile to consider a more inclusive and palatable rhetorical stance.

Burke seems to recognize the combination of different subject positions but doesn't privilege any particular combination, or establish any particular hierarchy of historical agents and interpretations. Orthodox Marxist literary criticism, despite on the surface being colored by a view of the "reality" of historical progression, tended in the 1930's to posit a more transhistorical, transcendental view of the proletariat. While I do not disagree with their depiction and analysis of the "scene" of the proletarian moment (the class struggle), I do take issue with Orthodox Marxism's idea of the historical agent(s), and the means and ends with which they must attain their goal.

Towards A Critical Re-Vision

When analyzing the proletarian literature of the 1930's we must recognize, as did Burke, that a variety of competing constructions of reality vie for the right to assert themselves on a cultural stage. Therefore, it would be prudent to reexamine the relationship of one to the other, and to the larger context in which the constructions themselves are created. In simple terms, proletarian literature can be partly characterized by an agitational discourse - us (labor) against them (capital). This is, as Michel Foucault terms it, a "strategic

situation" that results in a "strategic codification" of discourse (93) - in this case, the proletarian aesthetic.

This aesthetic is a method of discourse, a type of rhetoric that seeks as its goal a reorientation of power relations. While we have the establishment of a dichotomy, a rift created by different constructions or views of reality, each side is defined only in terms of the other. Resistance literature needs something to resist in its advocacy of a new sensibility. We need to see social reality from the standpoint of the exploiters and the exploited. In order to come to a true understanding of this period in American literature, we need to come as close as possible to viewing it objectively. Therefore, we should work to reilluminate the relationship between the two constructions - labor versus capital - so that we can better understand, first how the proletarian artist works to construct and assert identity so that we may, secondly, move towards an understanding of the cultural function and "value" of proletarian literature in general. As Edward Said tells us, we need histories "both more inclusive and more dynamic," and to ignore the coexistence of resistance culture and the dominant hegemony is to "miss out on what is essential about the world in the past century" (Said, xx.).

Whether or not it was necessary, critics did indeed attempt to shape the progression of the movement; they pictured themselves as a necessary piece of the puzzle and envisioned a movement in which artists and critics would work together to advance proletarian literature. However, from the ever-increasing conflicts, critics continually sought new methods or modes of criticism and only perpetuated the confusion. The failure of these debates suggests that we should perhaps reevaluate the role and place of literary criticism, and continue to amend our own systems of analysis today so that we can strive to shed new light on the relationship of the oppressor to the oppressed, and to develop new modes of analysis for studying American literary history.

Literary criticism is a valuable tool, if only because it offers alternate points of view that contribute to the plurality of ideas concerning life and cultural progression. In the 1990's, we have an established radical literary tradition (a luxury the writers of the 30's did not have outside of a few pre-Depression publications and 19th-century dime-novels and song-poems) upon which to build. One undesirable legacy of the 1930's literary criticism is excessive negativity, backbiting, and mutually destructive arguments. Instead, when analyzing the past and present, we should place emphasis on positivity and the idea that each work of literature is a piece of a cultural puzzle. No one work can accomplish the feat of

encompassing a complete proletarian worldview; the diversity of experience and style that manifests in literature makes this impossible. However, recognition of this diversity, and the fact that each diverse work is put together with other works to comprise a radical literary canon, will show that the whole picture represents a proletarian vision. Imperfect as it may be, a proletarian literary canon is our best resource for an insight into the working class world of the 1930's. All the individual works and the effects they evoke – the little pieces of the puzzle – help form the larger pieces that constitute the portrait that is American working-class culture – a culture that promotes class goals, that describes its life experience and its vision for the future.

The goal of the critics of the 1930's was to help formulate works of art that would help in illuminating proletarian class-consciousness. Should the critics have the viewed the canon as a sum of imperfect parts and accepted its value as a contribution to the formulation of class-consciousness, or were they right in attempting to shape the literature in a party-specific direction? Standards and literary formulas tended to dissolve the potential quality of a work of literature, as did overly heavy-handed or "tendentious" characterization in the literature itself. Certainly the critics had good intentions. Their creation of political standards for literature, though, suggests that many critics fancied themselves the keepers of an implicit power, who then used this power to claim authority over the artist. The duty of criticism is to interpret and analyze literature. Critics are entitled to their subjective opinions but have no justifiable right to erect walls of inclusion or exclusion to the halls of "good" literature.

Proletarian novelist Edwin Berry Burghum, in an issue of *Partisan Revie*w (volume II, April 1935) dedicated to many of the aforementioned issues and debates, defined a proletarian novel as "one written under the influence of dialectical materialism from the point of view of a class-conscious proletariat." This is a decent definition (if there has to be one); it incorporates a Marxist depiction of the historical socio-economic struggle as well as the advocacy *of*, not necessarily *by*, a class-conscious proletariat. Later in the same passage, though, he states "every proletarian novel craves its sequel." This implies the inherent limitations of literature, not to the point of denouncing the literature, but in way that stresses the natural progression of the movement towards its ultimate goal. Burghum emphasizes this process of historical evolution that is central to Marxism. He, like Granville Hicks, supports the depiction of society's living flux. This idea reflects the ever-fluctuating dynamic of the socio-economic forces at work in a particular age. Given this law, novels and other literature

that would reflect this dynamic, particularly proletarian literature, would subtly but definitely change. Given this tendency towards fluctuation, is it wise to concretize our views towards it, or prudent to impose some sort of literary standard?

Marxism is a worldview, not a special interest group whose purpose is to set literary standards into stone. The rifts that arose during the 1930's over proletarian literature exemplify the idea that applications of Marxism (or any other *ism*) differ and are open to individual interpretation. Given this subjectivity, the interests of the working class and the preservation and the progression of its culture should be more important than the class of critics who purport to represent it. The debates over aesthetic form are only one aspect of this issue, and historians' depictions of them have grown stale. We must attempt to relate a proletarian author's modes of representation to the working class culture of the 1930's as a whole in an attempt to understand the worker's relationships with each other, with those in the classes above them, and with their physical environment. As Lukacs has said: "with increasing globalism and mass media we see events as no longer isolated incidents; they affect us all as individuals – in all people, in all struggles and with the deferent power of government a sense of all people's problems are in each of us...hence the concrete possibilities for men to comprehend their own existence as something historically conditioned, for them to see in history something which deeply affects their daily lives" (Lukacs, 24).

Representation is now, as it was to the proletarian artists and critics of the 1930's, a crucial aspect of a novel's form and content, particularly a radical representation that quite seriously challenges the status quo. If we can focus on the strategies of the proletarian artist's modes of representation and understand his or her strengths and weaknesses, we can perhaps work towards devising a sounder theoretical model of analysis for resistance culture in general.

PART TWO - THE PROLETARIAN MOMENT: GASTONIA 1929

As a way of analyzing how the issues that fueled the debates within the proletarian literary movement actually manifest in proletarian literature, it is useful to apply these issues to a specific cultural and literary context. The 1929 strike at the Loray Mill in Gastonia, North Carolina provides such a context.

The strike is significant because there were six distinct "proletarian" novels written in its wake: *Strike!* by Mary Heaton Vorse (1929); *Beyond Desire* by Sherwood Anderson (1932); *The Gathering Storm* by Myra Page (1932); *To Make My Bread* by Grace Lumpkin (1932); *Call Home the Heart* by Fielding Burke (1932); and *The Shadow Before* by William Rollins (1934). Given the swing among Leftist writers of the 1930's towards the "inevitability" of revolution and the idea of literature as "an indispensable instrument for intensifying and organizing the vague impulses toward rebellion that are the foundation of the revolutionary mind" (Hicks, 303), these artists seized the proletarian moment, so to speak. The Gastonia novelists created works distinct for their variety of form and methods of characterization, but which are also reflective of the issues that confronted all proletarian authors.

Outside of the critical debates themselves, the novels are useful in illustrating the relations between the working classes and the capitalist culture that dominated them. Individual characterization within each novel offers analytic tools with which to study the workers' cultural networks and the tension between their new lives in the mills and the individualistic agrarian mentality with which they had earlier ground out their living on mountain farms. The Gastonia strike, a manifestation of an ideological confrontation between paternalistic capitalism and Communism, is a "cultural abnormality" that provides an example of a distinct political division in an isolated social context (Pope, 205).

The strike is also crucial to understanding southern labor history in Depression-era America. At the time, Gaston County had more textile plants than anywhere else in the world and was a gateway to the untapped masses of unorganized textile workers in the South, some 300,000 strong. As more than one union organizer undoubtedly knew, the Loray Mill (the area's largest) was the key to gaining a foothold in Gaston County; Gaston County was the key to North Carolina, and North Carolina was the key to the rest of the South.

The international publicity given the strike and the murder trials following it helped contribute to the strike's almost mythic status in labor lore, placing the Gastonia story on par with the saga of Sacco and Vanzetti. The presence of the International Labor Defense, an organization formed by the CPUSA in 1925 to offer both legal counsel and to organize mass protest, further contributed to the publicity surrounding the strike. In addition, the strike presented the CPUSA and the National Textile Workers (NTWU) with challenges that later became all too familiar to the story of labor relations: questions of race, religion, the role of women, and the working classes' general political conservatism.

Within the CPUSA, the strike presented problems to the organization itself and in turn, its strategy among the workers. Chief among these issues was the role of women in the CP and in the working class- movement in general. Given what Leftists felt was the imminence of revolution and the establishment of a classless society, a platform of women's issues, while placed on the Party's agenda, was given lower priority. This problem is the subject of an essay by Robert Schaeffer, who argues the historical significance of articulated feminist concerns within a characteristically male-dominated structure like the CPUSA. Given the lack of an autonomous women's organization during the period, the articulation of feminist concerns (in both the strike, and in its fictional recreation) becomes crucial to an understanding of the feminist movement in America. Of the six Gastonia novels, four were written by females who made the explication and representation of feminist issues central to their work. This "feminist" protest is the subject of Joseph Urgo's 1985 essay concerning the Gastonia novels. In fact, many of the recent reconsiderations of these novels concern these "feminist" writers and their contributions to the women's movement.

The race question is crucial to understanding the problems of the working classes and their organization throughout America, but has particular relevance in southern labor history. Obviously, racism was a huge impediment to organizing and was perhaps one factor in the revolution's ultimate failure. As John Salmond, author of a recent book on the strike has said, "Issues of race could always blur issues of class in the American South" (80). Given the overwhelming tensions in the region between whites and blacks, white laborers' reluctance to join forces with blacks was a continual obstacle to the movement's progression. CP organizers recognized this and thought of Gastonia as an opportunity to combat white chauvinism in the Party.

The question of religion, too, has particular relevance in the South, a characteristically reverent culture. The CP had noticeable difficulty coming to terms with the Christian faith of

the Gastonia strikers, a problem aggravated by the deep entrenchment of religion in southern culture. At Gastonia, the church leaders hailed the textile manufacturers as the community's rightful leaders, and the town's fervor for mill life and rapid industrialization has been characterized as a type of religious awakening (Pope, 16). Liston Pope argues that the "churches assisted the rise of new economic institutions by creating opinion favorable to industry and industrialists, by occasional direct action on the part of religious leaders in the organization of the mills, and by helping to mold a more effective labor force" (35). Charges of atheism among the strikers and the CP organizers filled the pages of the *Gastonia Gazette* and the *Charlotte Observer*, the area's leading newspapers. The CP leaders failed to address the question of religion adequately, and the dominance of traditional community values hurt their strategies considerably. As rifts between the older community (and the way of life it championed) and the new, radical vision of the CP became apparent, and as community and religious opposition became more pronounced, strikers backed out (Pope, 262). Its stance on religion - or lack of one - was a glaring weakness of CP strategy at Gastonia.

The Loray Mill (Gastonia's seventh) was established in 1900 with mostly local capital. During this time, Gastonia was still in a transition phase from a predominantly agricultural economy to one centered on mill life. The mountain population from which the mill owners recruited their workers was notable for its cheap and typically docile labor supply. These patient, long-suffering mountain people were also attractive to the mill owners because of their homogeneity - they spoke the same language and dialects and were predominantly white. These workers followed the promise of mill life - higher wages and the excitement of town life - into the mill villages and were genuinely enthusiastic about their new way of life. The mill executives were imbued with a similar optimism and commonly thought themselves to be agents of community welfare (Pope, 16). Reverend John Speakes felt that "Southern industry is a spiritual movement...I personally believe it was God's way for the development of a forsaken people" (Pope, 25). With this backdrop of community support and a system of paternalism entrenched, the mill flourished. In 1919, the Jenckes Company of Rhode Island took over its operation and began to institute northern industrial philosophies and scientific management. In 1923, a merger consolidated the Manville-Jenckes Company.

The company's emphasis on profit and efficiency became increasingly blatant and unsavory to the members of the community, who felt all managerial policies should be kept under the guise of public welfare and Christianity. However, as Pope argues, "religion appears to have been partly a mask for economic advantage from the very beginning" (20).

Rifts arose between the community leaders and mill executives over these policies. The laborers themselves saw their dreams of a better wage and nicer homes and communities quickly shattered by backbreaking work, lowered wages, higher rents, and decrepit, unsanitary housing. Initially, the family labor system that workers brought from the farms translated well into mill life. However, families became increasingly concerned as it became obvious that children and mothers had to work constantly so that families might eke out a living. Children went without school and mothers juggled factory work with all the duties of the home.

Workers became increasingly discontented, and briefly struck in 1919, behind the United Textile Workers. In 1929, however, the NTWU took notice of the situation in Gastonia, and recognizing the potential for the greater cause, sent Communist organizer Fred Beal to North Carolina. On April 1, 1929, the workers voted unanimously to strike.

The demands were simple: establishment of a minimum wage, the elimination of hank clocks, better housing and cheaper rent, and the recognition of the union (Salmond, 23). By April 16th, however, most of the day shift had returned, due to the workers' fear that they might be blacklisted for their strike involvement. The scarcity of resources for striking workers and fear of vigilante violence hampered the organizers' efforts and the strike seemed to be just about over. A few days later, the now infamous Committee of One Hundred, a local vigilante mob comprised of mill leaders, local policemen, and townspeople destroyed the union headquarters. Outraged, Beal staged another walkout for early June.

The community, initially apathetic about the strike, became increasingly incensed over the continued violence and the presence of the Communists, whom they felt were tearing the very fabric of Gastonia society. Local newspapers emphasized the atheism and racial policies of the CP, and community opinion attempted to drive a wedge between workers and the union, forcing them to choose their loyalties, and therefore isolating more stubborn strikers from community protection and approval (Pope, 252). Frequent nationalist and religious appeals were made to the strikers, and for the most part were successful. However, as violence escalated, so did the intensity of the national and international media spotlight. In one confrontation between strikers and police, Police Chief Orville Aderholt was killed.

The murder and the trials that ensued solidified Gastonia's place in labor history. *The Daily Worker, New Masses,* and *The Labor Defender* made international pleas for financial support for the accused strikers. Vigilante violence and police evictions continued. There was increasing tension over defense strategies between chief counsel Tom Jimison and the

ILD. Just before the trial was set to begin, Judge Frank Carter withdrew because he felt that the CP was injecting larger political issues into the case and so he "would not be a party to making the defendants martyrs to a larger cause" (Salmond, 95). Because of the volatile atmosphere surrounding the trial, it was moved to Charlotte. However, the new judge declared a mistrial after a juror, J.G. Campbell, reportedly went insane when an effigy of the slain police chief was wheeled into the courtroom wearing Aderholt's bloodstained clothing.

Strike leaders Fred Beal and Vera Busch gave accounts of a defense team in disarray because of factions within the ILD and the CP. In fact, many accounts claim that CP directives hampered Beal's work from the outset because of the Party's continued emphasis on world revolutionary politics over trade unionism (Salmond, 28). The press and the community continued its onslaught against the CP and their ideas concerning racial equality and atheism. A new trial was to begin on September 30th, with J.P. Flowers replacing Jimison as chief counsel for the defense. However, the tide changed when striking balladeer Ella May Wiggins was shot and killed as she rode in the back of a truck to a union meeting.

The continued violence against the strikers was sanctioned by the community's disdain for the union leaders' revolutionary ideas, and by the beginning of the second trial, all CP activity at Gastonia had ceased. The verdicts were entered amidst a legal atmosphere in which strikers' religious beliefs and Communist party affiliation were used as fuel against them. Charges against nine of the original defendants (each of these nine were women) were dropped. Of the remaining seven, leader Fred Beal, George Carter, Clarence Miller, and Joseph Harrison were sentenced to 17-20 years; William McGinness and Louis McLoughlin were sentenced to 12-15 years; and Red Hendricks received a sentence of 5-7 years (Salmond, 148). Released on bail, a few of the men fled to the Soviet Union. However, Beal later renounced his ties to the CP and depicted his role in the strike in his book *Proletarian Journey*.

An appeal was filed by the defense team but was later dismissed by the North Carolina Supreme Court. The investigation into Wiggins's death continued but resulted in no convictions. The spectacular events and violence that surrounded the strike did much to contribute to the Gastonia "myth." The international scope given to Gastonia injected issues much larger than the fight for better working conditions into Southern labor history - paternalistic capitalism versus communism, America versus the CP, and God versus atheism. The problems that resulted for the CP as a result of these mythic confrontations are indicative

of CPUSA weaknesses at the time and are crucial to comprehension of CPUSA and labor history.

The literary legacy of the strike is no less complex and important to 1930's cultural history. The six Gastonia novels articulate the reasons for Gastonia's universal significance and "demonstrated ways in which that significance could be understood and applied to the lives of readers" (Urgo, 67). The novels stand as examples of slightly different approaches to Gastonia and to the issues and goals of proletarian fiction. Each author has different emphases that exemplify different ideological sympathies. Thus, the Gastonia novels are both reflective of the issues within the proletarian literary movement and within the organized labor movement in the 1930's as a whole.

The remainder of this thesis will discuss each of the novels, with efforts made to flesh out comparisons and contrasts between each novel, and between each author's approach. The analysis reads the novels for their approaches to ideology, their modes of representation of issues central to the 1930's labor movement, and the ways in which they reflect and deviate from the proletarian literary "norm."

Strike! (1930)

Mary Heaton Vorse's *Strike!* published in 1930, was the first of the six Gastonia novels to be released. Vorse, a labor reporter and activist since 1912, came to Gastonia to cover the second murder trial and lived with the strike's organizers for six weeks. The novel has a distinct journalistic feel - the story is told from the perspective of two northern reporters, Roger Hewlett and Ed Hoskins. Each character represents Vorse at different points in her own career; Roger, the young, naive but passionate sympathizer and Hoskins, the experienced, angry strike veteran. This journalistic perspective lends the story an authorial distance, in that it is written by outsiders on the inside. This distance is both a strength and a weakness of *Strike!*

Strike! was judged a critical success by most contemporary critics who hailed Vorse's strict realism, particularly as it contributed to the book's value as an historical document. Vorse's reportorial strategy is particularly effective in presenting group solidarity, the psychology of the mob, and in describing cultural rifts between the upper and working classes. At times, though, the book suffers from narrative inconsistency because of this journalistic approach. Vorse attempts to gain insight into the strike leaders' characters without fully developing them and at times drops characterization altogether in favor of reporting

There is an inconsistency in Vorse's characterization - at times "character" illuminates a particular political issue, and other times her description of "character" serves to reveal personality. Her inability to concretize this distinction distorts the novel's focus and tends to hamper her attempted union of historical facts and an analysis of the cultural and psychological factors underpinning them.

While *Strike!* received much acclaim as "socialist realism" from Leftist critics, particularly Mike Gold, the novel is more interesting in the ways it deviates from the Leftist's vision of a "proletarian" work of art. Biographer Dee Garrison points out in her introduction to the novel's most recent edition that Vorse "had learned the failure of the Communist promise firsthand" through her tour of Moscow in 1922 and through her intimate knowledge of national party leaders and Communist-backed strikes (xvii). While *Strike!* is undoubtedly sympathetic to the cause of the working class, Vorse's book is almost completely devoid of explicit Communist theory and propaganda. The workers are depicted as unsophisticated hill people rather than class-conscious militants. Midway through the novel, one of Ma Gilfillin's daughters says to Mamie Lewes: "We was mountain folks, an' come a man from the hills atalkin' how much folks made. Me an' Will thought th' money grew on trees down yere ahearin' his talk, so when we got ma'ied we come down. Seem's like they's been nothin' but trouble sence" (55). Mamie Lewes, a fictional representation of striking balladeer Ella May Wiggins, further illustrates this "simplicity": "We're going to have a Union/All over the South/So we's kin have good clothen'/And live in a better house" (103). *Strike!* is tinged throughout with a humanitarian focus that relies less on explicit Communist theory and more on depiction of the strikers' hardships.

Another aspect of Vorse's deviation from the proletarian literary "norm" is her treatment of issues central to internal CP problems in the 1930's: factionalism, the question of religion, and the sexual exclusivity of the Party. The latter has inspired much of the recent refocused attention given to *Strike!* and the other Gastonia novels. Joseph Urgo argues that Vorse, as did the other female Gastonia novelists, used the strike as a window into CP sexism. Vorse takes great pains throughout the novel to articulate that women were consistently the more militant and dedicated of the strikers. Irma Rankin, a strike organizer in the novel, says "I think the women are pluckier than the men...They've got fighting stuff in them, these women" (11). Irma's own struggle with her male counterpart, Fer Deane, illustrates this issue and points to a larger problem of CP strategy at Gastonia - disorganization among the leaders. Vorse casts the two consistently at odds with each other: "There was an ancient

animosity between them. Irma was trying to dominate Fer, to put something over on him. In a way, to diminish him" (11).

This factionalism, and a continued illustration of Irma's militance occurs later when she opposes Fer's order for the women to fraternize with the National Guardsmen, sent to monitor and check strike violence. Fer says, "They're the same folks, the same blood. There's no reason why they shouldn't understand what this is about. Make em' good and ashamed to be put on this kind of duty." Irma responds by saying, somewhat dogmatically, "you're confusing the minds of these workers...the police and soldiers are their natural enemies, and they ought to be taught to consider them so" (49). By casting Irma as what Urgo calls a "spoiler," Vorse seems to be offering a critique of Communist dogmatism and its failure to appreciate a worker's humanity. This rift between Fer and Irma is further illustrated when Roger explains, "Irma had a way of trying to ride over Fer, of trying to undermine his dignity, and to pluck from him his confidence in himself" (50).

From these observations of divided leadership springs Vorse's treatment of individualism and collectivity, two crucial issues of representation amongst Leftist authors and critics in the 1930's. Through Fer, Vorse makes a specific comment on the need for collective effort in the labor movement. As Fer approaches a speaker's platform he "felt the weight of [the people's] faith, and his own smallness and inadequacy" (54). Fer, isolated and idolized by the strikers, feels an obligation to win the battle himself, and realizes the workers half expect him to. By casting Fer as vulnerable and somewhat unwilling to shoulder the burden, Vorse reemphasizes the need for collective action and dispels the mythic labor leader that is something of an archetype in Leftist fiction. Later, while riding with Fer to the country for a bit of rest, Roger thinks to himself:

> Fer had spoken in the voice of the homesick, in a voice which said 'wouldn't it be nice to be like other fellows my age? With a nice girl by my side. Not to have to think of strikes or how the other fellow is going to fed. Not to have to worry about organizing. Not to have to worry about people in jail. Not to have to worry about mobs or men toting guns (103).

Vorse's treatment of collective action is perhaps one of *Strike!*'s most interesting features. As Joseph Urgo has noted, "the traditional American conception of manhood, the individualist, is held up by Vorse in contrast to the joining, cooperating spirit among the proletariat" (Urgo, 70). Vorse's treatment of the towering strength of the collective, spurred on by "its own powerful vitality," runs consistently throughout the novel. This emphasis seems to suggest what many authors felt was the inevitability of revolution, if only the workers

would "come out" and "organize": "That's the trouble with these folks, they won't stick. They's fer the union en' strikin' one minute and you ken skeer 'em out the next minute" (102). In contrast, Vorse shows how the "mob" can be reckless and dangerous as well, as in her depiction of the vigilante Committee of One Hundred. Vorse also shows how the ideology of the "comfortable people," like the Parkers, consolidates community antipathy towards the strikers and particularly, their leaders: "hate was the comfortable people. Hate and Mob were a multiplication of the Parkers" (20). The strike's opponents have come to use this hatred as justification for the violent suppression of the strike.

Vorse asserts this need for collectivity as a tool for fighting the community's concentrated hostility towards the strikers, and as a way to illuminate the cultural rifts that have arisen because of the strike. Through consistent employment of juxtaposition, Vorse isolates what Roger notes is a "picture, sharp and clear, of the cleavage in the community" (20). Vorse creates images of the strikers' despair and contrasts them with depictions of the social life of the comfortable people. Anti-Union speeches, appeals to "Americanism," and ideological justifications for strike-breaking are placed in opposition to the bleakness of strikers' lives and their roles in perpetuating the wealth and prosperity of the upper classes and their social order: "All around the Piedmont, the mill hill people went on in their own way, partaking not at all of this other life, though they helped support it. Where would the prosperity have been without them?" (97). Vorse suggests that the mill population never becomes part of a town and remains separated forever, physically and ideologically.

Roger's naiveté throughout the novel's early stages is somewhat ironic, because as a newspaper reporter he does not seem to fully grasp the media's role in supplying arms for the war against the strikers. Editorials in *The Gastonia Gazette* constantly played up the strikers' perceived un-Americanism, and aggravated community antipathy by calling the strikers and their leaders "Reds" and by criticizing their lack of religion. Roger and Ed repeatedly note that the strikers are urged by Fer against violence, who is always "telling the workers to leave their guns at home; worried to death about a shooting" (21). As Vorse has shown, Fer is anything but the violent, aggressive agitator the town believes he is. For townsfolk, Fer is "the very Anti-Christ," the embodiment of the lawlessness that threatens the stability of the society. Mrs. Parker, "her halo of white hair quivering," says, "If there is no law to remove this man and his associates, we will be compelled to take things into our own hands. We have a right to protect our lives and our property" (23). This false justification provides the fuel for the

town's repression of the strike and is an example of Vorse's treatment of the role of ideology in perpetuating class divisions.

As the strike progresses, Vorse depicts the ideological escalation to a point where townspeople believe "that agitators and Reds were hiding behind every burdock" and that " a colossal plot was existing whose very essence was assassination...All union people were low, skulking, murderous radicals who wormed their way into simple-minded workers' confidence...so went the editorials in the papers; so went the thoughts of the comfortable people" (158). The Committee of One Hundred had destroyed union headquarters, but townspeople came to believe that the workers had done it to themselves in an attempt to sway community opinion in their favor. Community hostility drives the workers "inward, into affection for one another, and into religion" (108). This solidarity, established not by dogmatic class-consciousness or by Communist theory but by common cultural and religious ties is another aspect of Vorse's notion of collectivity and of the distinctive qualities of the Southern labor movement.

By treating the religion of the strikers sympathetically instead of as an "opiate," Vorse may be commenting on the Northern organizers' failure to appreciate the subtleties of southern culture and their subsequent organizational difficulties. With Fer as their messiah, the union is like a church to the strikers, "kinda like salvation. You belong to the union, and somehow or another, you're saved. [The workers] have a mystical feeling about the union" (109). This utter dependence on the union, as we have seen, is a burden to Fer. Strikers are starved back into the mills, one by one. The paternalistic economy that dominated the town had taken initiative from many of the workers and left them without a true feeling of solidarity embedded in class-consciousness. The strikers have trouble coping with the difficulties of their involvement - evictions, lack of supplies, and sickness. They look to the organizers for support and guidance, but the leaders' inexperience and the lack of CP support and understanding cripples their efforts.

From the novel's outset, it is clear that the author and her striking characters (particularly Irma) have larger causes to serve than just the Gastonia mills. The constant tone of optimism that resonates throughout the novel is indicative of this, as is repeated discussion of other strikes and the "movement" as a whole. Paired with Irma's lust for militance and martyrdom, it is unclear whether the strike serves Vorse as a microcosmic example of political revolution or as a forum in which to discuss Southern labor relations specifically. Vorse's scope is broad; consequently, she struggles to keep focus throughout. Vorse seems too eager

to seize opportunities to discuss larger concerns within the movement, and thus tends to distort very real problems in political strategy because of a preoccupation with optimistic, forward-reaching conclusions. Characters and their confrontations become scientific specimens, mouthpieces for Leftist causes, and the real story is often overshadowed. Fer, upon his death, is quickly replaced by a myth, " a composite of all the virtues he had not possessed," which is both an ironic comment on individualism and an example of the distortion of the reality of the strike.

The tone of hope continues to the novel's end as the workers tell themselves, "We haven't seen the last of this" (234). Roger's "conversion" to the CP at the end is typical of the methods of closure many Leftist writers employed and was a consistent point of criticism among Leftist authors and critics. There is more evidence than not suggesting that Vorse did have the larger cause in mind, using her depiction of the strike as what Garrison has described as a "symbolic microcosm of world revolution" (x). It can be argued that Vorse and other Leftist writers are somewhat justified in their employment of "utopian" endings, as their specific goal was to construct class-consciousness in literature. Given this goal, it is not difficult to understand why they would imbue their work with a sense of optimism and a view towards the future.

Beyond Desire (1932)

It is doubtful that any Leftist critic of the 1930's would have fully accepted Sherwood Anderson's *Beyond Desire* (1932) into the proletarian "canon." Even more than Vorse's novel, *Beyond Desire* is distinguished by the ways it deviates from the proletarian literary "norm." Like *Strike!, Beyond Desire* is almost completely devoid of explicit Communist theory or propaganda but still imparts a deep sympathy for the plight of the southern mill worker.

In his introduction to the 1970 paperbound edition of the novel, Walter Rideout explains that Anderson's sympathies with the southern mill workers arose after he took a tour through the South in the early 1930's. Rideout quotes Anderson as saying that "the whole tendency of modern industry has been rather to dehumanize people." Anderson focuses on men and women's increasing alienation from themselves and each other as a result of industrialism. However, *Beyond Desire*'s vision is not centered on the political; rather, Anderson concerns himself with his characters' psychological struggles for something primitive and essential that transcends socio-economic relations.

In many ways, Anderson's subject matter and methods protect him from backsliding into many of the weaknesses of the proletarian genre: unbalanced characters, narrative inconsistency, and heavy-handed employment of ideology. The novel's central character, Red Oliver, is a man caught between two worlds - that of the town, of what Vorse calls "the comfortable people," and that of the mill workers with whom he sympathizes . Despite alliances with both classes, Red doesn't belong with either; educated in the North and born into the professional class, he feels out of touch with Southern value systems, and despite his presence as a worker in the mill (and star player on the mill baseball team), he does not fully belong with the working class. His unresolved search for essence, for fundamental truth, is depicted by Anderson as a result of cultural rifts between races, between the older, patriarchal society and a new society waiting to be born, and as a result of increasing division between the sexes.

While on the surface these issues have direct relation to the burgeoning Communist movement in the 1930's, Anderson creates a mood more universal and timeless. His concern in the novel is with his characters' psychological conflicts rather than their overt political action (of which there is little). Red's, and to a lesser extent Ethel Long's, search for a more primitive, essential response to their alienation and disempowerment in the face of paternalistic capitalism is thus explored thematically. Many Leftist or proletarian authors' Communist agendas were relatively foreign to Southern culture, and thus required an author to rely on polemical and propagandistic devices such as the archetypal "mentor" figure or the "conversion" method of closure, in which a work's major character undergoes a transformation to radicalism, as Roger Hewlett does in *Strike!* In contrast, Anderson employs extensive characterization atypical of proletarian fiction, and a more esoteric, philosophical approach to the effects of capitalism on the individual psyche.

This approach invited much criticism from Leftist critics who noted that Anderson's lack of intellectual "direction" created a certain imbalance in the novel's style and message. Granville Hicks claimed Anderson did not go far enough in communicating Communist ideas and visions for the future, while critics outside the Left felt that the attention Anderson did give to Communist ideology (through Red) diluted any artistic merit Anderson may have claimed for the novel. Still, while *Beyond Desire* is admittedly weak in some aspects, particularly in its overreliance on stream of consciousness, it does shed light on the ways in which man is alienated as a result of industrialism and capitalism.

The novel is divided into four books. The first of these, "Youth," is primarily concerned with a young Red Oliver's initial impressions of social and racial relations. Red's father, a doctor, was married in middle age to a young nurse, of whom the town did not approve: "It was said in the town, whispered about the town, that the woman was not from a very good family" (11). Dr. Oliver also traveled frequently to visit a "certain colored woman, living alone in Langdon" (13). These depictions of Southern culture and of tensions between races and classes are subsequently pursued by Anderson through the minds of his characters. He relies on terse, concise prose that conveys a sense of fragmentation, like random memories; they are reminiscient of the recollections of a child. Things are noticed, but not "explained" in an ideological sense. Anderson portrays Red as a confused young man with a developing social consciousness.

This growing consciousness becomes more and more acute as Anderson explores the relationship between Red and his mother, who "suddenly began going regularly to Church. She got converted. One evening, when Red was a high school boy, she went off alone to Church. There was a revivalist in town, a Methodist revivalist. Red always remembered that evening" (14). This emphasis on religion is a consistent theme throughout the novel. Like the other Gastonia novelists, with the exception of William Rollins, Anderson discusses the ways in which Southern mill life is sanctioned and consolidated by the local church. Tom Shaw, a local mill owner passionate about the promise of new machinery and industrialization, begins meeting frequently with the local preacher, who then preaches to his congregation of "a new Heaven men might enter, did not have to wait to enter" (33). As in Vorse's novel, this utopian dream of a better life, where "people who had been out of work, many people who had never had a cent to their names, suddenly began to get wages," consumes the town like a religious awakening:

> "Yes God," someone in the audience said fervently. "I want that, I want it, I want it"... "Every man and every woman must go deep into his own pocket now. If you have a little property, go to the bank now and borrow money on it. Buy stock in the mill"... "Yes God, save us God" (34).

At times, Anderson depicts Southern religion as an "opiate," but is less dogmatic in his denunciation of religion than, say, Myra Page. At the outset of the novel, Anderson sets the stage for his discussion of religion by suggesting that people needed "warmth" that religion could no longer provide them. In a letter to Red, his friend Neil Bradley (Red's first Communist influence) had said "religion was an old gown, grown thin and with all the colors

washed out of it. People still wore the old gown but it did not warm them any more...people need romance, and most of all, the romance of feeling, of thinking they were trying to go somewhere" (4). Anderson exposes the emptiness and hypocrisy of the Southern whites' religion, their code of "peculiar chivalry," and the need for a new direction.

In contrast, Anderson presents the black people and their church as full of an essential passion and life-force that is needed to overcome the alienation and emotional poverty that is the novel's focal point. In many proletarian novels, the issue of race is primarily discussed in terms of union organization. Union leaders advocate organizing blacks because of their sheer numbers and their contribution to the collective strength of the working classes. Anderson, however, discusses blacks' inner spirit and strength, a strong sensual vitality that is needed to bridge the gap he sees between classes and between men and women. There is a hint of unintended racism in Anderson's romantic depiction of blacks that, at times, distorts his intended effect. However, this theme is more consistently treated in the novel's third book, "Ethel," the story of Ethel Long and her search for empowerment in the face of traditional female roles and sexuality, perpetuated by an outdated Southern code of gentility and conduct.

Ethel, like Red, was educated in a northern college. She feels displaced in Langdon society and harbors a deep resentment towards the old South, represented by her father, a retired judge and a southern gentleman. Ethel "would have liked rather being more simple, even primitive...or pagan" (110), and finds in Red a companion with whom she can discuss literature and ideas. Ethel's lust for essence comes through as she recalls the sexuality of the blacks in her community: " Southern white women, growing up, always conscious in some subtle way of brown women about...women big of hips, unmoral, broad-breasted women, peasants, brown bodies...They having something in them for men, too, for both brown and white men" (108). Ethel sees in Red a young, firm sexual vibrancy that appeals to her own sexuality, but she also sees in him the excitement of intellectual confusion and the search for answers. This search for something "beyond desire," for both Red and Ethel, comes to be a search for some essential truth and meaning in a capitalist system that continually commodifies desires and morals in a way that perpetuates the cultural structures that support it.

For Anderson, this essence is to be found in a spirit of brotherhood, in an apolitical union of souls. His approach in the novel suggests his skepticism towards Communist

ideology and his feeling that a type of transcendence is needed. Nowhere is this spirit more effectively conveyed than in Book Two of the novel, "Mill Girls."

For most critics both inside and outside of the Left, "Mill Girls" is the highlight of the novel and an achievement in Anderson's literary career. The terse, simplistic style that wears thin towards the novel's close is perfect for "Mill Girls" and its depiction of the lives of Grace, Fanny, Doris, and Nell, all of whom are employees at the mill. While certainly important to the novel, "Mill Girls" is not intricately tied to the novel's plot and thus seems to have allowed Anderson greater freedom in exploring the total consciousness of his female characters. Anderson uses subtly shifting time schemes, going back and forth in time and between characters to get a fuller sense of their interaction. In addition, through his sense of shifting time, we get a fuller sense of a character and how she deals psychologically with her place in mill society.

The relationship between Doris and Grace is symbolic of this spirit of unity that Anderson explores throughout the novel. While there are hints of homosexuality between the girls, their relationship exemplifies a spirit of nurturing, of passion, and of love that is not directly tied to sex per se, but with a type of energy that is found in the feminine, maternal instinct. This motherly instinct is felt deeply by Doris, who massages the weariness from Grace's body as Grace dreams of the escape and refuge she found at her family's mountain farm: "She'd rub Grace all over. She didn't exactly feel her. Every one said that knew that Doris had good rubbing hands. She had strong quick hands. They were alive hands" (77).

Through Doris, Anderson characterizes the strength and essential spirit that is needed to bridge the gap between genders. Like the other male characters in the novel, Ed, Doris' husband, lacks this essential strength. However, his presence in "Mill Girls" signals a shift back into the world of ideas and of an "ever-present consciousness of a world outside the mill" (76).

This awakening consciousness is represented through Ed, "a man of ideas," but is also effectively portrayed by Anderson when he places the girls at the town fair. As the girls ride the ferris wheel, Doris sees the entire town laid out before her and begins to realize her place in it. Anderson follows this scene with a depiction of the women's lives in the mills:

> You couldn't rightly say that people like Doris, Nell, Grace, and Fanny lived in their houses. They lived in the mill....their lives were walled in, shut in. How could anyone ever know who hadn't been caught and held from childhood, through young girlhood on into womanhood...their lives were in rooms. (94)

Set against this claustrophobic, stifling effect of mill life, the girls' presence at the fair signals an escape, a chance to be free.

As Anderson moves out of "Mill Girls" and back into the stories of Ethel and Red, he begins to address what becomes a central theme of the novel's last two books: "a sense of the oneness of human beings not realized yet" (147). Anderson suggests that the cause of this gap can be found in the emptiness of Southern religion and codes of conduct. Ethel's father is one example of this emphasis:

> Suddenly he stopped reading. He seemed to have stopped thinking, didn't want to think. It was one of the ways in which the South, although the Southerner would never admit it, had fallen in with the North. Not to think, to read newspapers instead, go to Church regularly...not being any more truly religious...listen to the radio...join a civic club...boost for growth. "Don't think, you may begin to think what it really means." (114)

Ethel notices that most men, like her father, come to a point of comfort in the capitalist system where "all intellectuality" dies in them.

Part of Ethel's frustration with societal restraints manifests in her struggle for answers and in her "general revolt against men" (152). She rails against middle class values and wealth and sees something of an answer in Communism. However, she can never fully live the message, Anderson suggests, because of her apparent inability to move past a world of ideas into a world of empathy and action. Ethel's relationship with Blanche, her father's new wife, is contrasted with the spiritual bond that Doris and Grace share. The tension between Ethel and Blanche comes to the fore when Blanche makes sexual advances towards Ethel. This, in contrast to Doris and Grace, is somewhat of an empty and misguided revolt against societal norms, sex as a commodified desire rather than the sexual life-force Anderson feels is needed. Ethel goes through all the surface fads and lives by a type of fashionable cynicism, and her puzzling marriage to the abrasive Tom Riddle suggests Ethel has succumbed to the desire for money, social standing, and stability.

This spirit, as it was in "Mill Girls," is depicted by Anderson in Books Three and Four as primarily personified by black women and the young women of the mill. The lack of a clearly defined black character in the novel is thus somewhat troubling. On the other hand, it may be that Anderson refrained from creating a black character to remain true to the abstract, transcendent spirit he sees in them. Either way, the spirit for Anderson lies in human community rather than strictly union solidarity.

An interesting combination of a growing social consciousness and the fundamental spirit Anderson seeks can be seen in Molly Seabright, a young mill worker brought to the mill before she was legally of age. Molly is not entirely disillusioned with mill life, but is always aware of its devastating effects on herself and her friends. Still, she finds some satisfaction in her work. She thinks, "Why can't we, in America can't we, in America -machine people - machine age - why can't we make it a sacred thing - a ceremony - joy in it - laughter in the mills - songs in the mills - new churches - new sacred places" (284). However, the looms become so much a part of her that they drive her own ideas and desires away: "She didn't dare do to much thinking...she had become a mother and the looms her children" (286). The machines are killing this spirit of kinship she feels with her coworkers, and despite arousal by "big hard words," Anderson is somewhat inconclusive about Molly, especially as she finds Red and mistakes him for a Communist organizer going to help strikers at Birchfield (Gastonia).

Red, perhaps not altogether unwilling to assume the identity Molly creates for him, is still somewhat confused as to his place, and thinks, "I wish I could be something real" (314). Red's failure to find the answers he seeks in Communism suggests Anderson's distrust of ideology and desire for something transcendent. He seems to imply that class consciousness, as created by purely intellectual activity, is an inherently artificial construction. Anderson and Red seek something more organic, something like the passion and strength they find in women. The apparent emptiness of ideology becomes obvious when Red is shot and killed in a standoff with the National Guard, martyred to a cause of which he was not fully a part and in which he did not fully believe.

Together with the stories of Molly and Ethel, Red's death suggests that Anderson meant to convey a sense of the loss of vibrancy and human spirit at the hands of the textile industry and the southern paternalist economy it supported. Anderson hopes to preserve a sense of that strength that he sees in Doris and in the "brown women," a strength with which workers could fight against the oppressive spirit of modern industry, "the New Gods of the American scene."

Placed in context with the other Gastonia novels, *Beyond Desire* stands apart as a unique treatment of the race question in labor relations. In addition, of the six authors, Anderson is the least ideological in delivery, which created confusion as to the novel's place in the radical literary canon. Still, Anderson's approach, while in some places uneven, does allow him to explore more deeply the psyches of his characters.

The Gathering Storm (1932)

Myra Page's *The Gathering Storm* (1932) has frequently been labeled overly ideological, "a virtual showcase of Party doctrine with almost no literary merit" (Urgo, 73); a work that fits the model of a proletarian novel almost perfectly. Outside of the Left, the book was reviewed by only two publications, the *New Republic* and *London Times*, both of which found the book "painfully propagandistic" (Urgo, 74). Indeed, of the six Gastonia novels, Page's approach is the most ideologically "correct." Page shows almost complete faith in the Communist Party and the Soviet Union, and the novel is subsequently didactic and thoroughly dedicated to the Soviet "promise."

In Christina Baker's biography of Page, she reports that Page was also aware of the novel's shortcomings, but felt "even within the movement I didn't feel *Gathering Storm* got a fair hearing." The novel, while concentrated on the events at Gastonia, is international in scope. Page centers the action in the South, but takes the reader to New York, Chicago, and Russia to reflect the event's international significance. This broad scope opens Page to charges that she attempted to cover too much ground and subsequently diluted the novel's focus. Page admitted as much, saying "I put everything in but the kitchen stove" (Baker, 117). Still, the novel is important for several reasons. As Urgo has noted, Page addresses feminist issues, particularly through Marge Crenshaw. Marge is contrasted with the Russian Bessie (her brother's lover) in a way that highlights their differences in socio-economic background. Urgo feels that this is Page's attempt to show the possibility of heterosocial redefinition with economic revolution. Bessie, a Soviet radical, is unencumbered by pregnancy or by sex-role typification. Page depicts her as a strong, dangerous radical in control of her own destiny. She is not constantly pressured by men to have sex, nor is she constantly harassed by the chronic ailments associated with working in the mills.

In contrast, it is only after her husband dies that Marge can become fully involved in union activity, and even then, her participation is only a few muffled words at an obscure rally. On the other hand, Marge's brother, Tom, travels to the Soviet Union and rises in the ranks of the Communist Party, unbound by sexism. It is also somewhat important to note that of Marge's two children, the healthy one is a boy, while the child who is born sickly and dies shortly thereafter is female. Urgo feels that Page, much like Vorse, is attempting to comment on the wasted talent of many CP women and show how working-class politics were almost synonymous with gender politics at this time.

However, much of Page's novel, particularly its illumination of racial issues and the characters' deep social (and underlying religious) connection with the land, has gone unnoticed. In addition, Page's novel is the only one of the Gastonia novels that has significant black characters (a possible exception is Mary Allen in *To Make My Bread*). Martha and Fred Morgan and their neighbors, the Johnsons, live in Back Row, called "niggertown" by the mill whites. The story of their family is presented in contrast to the Crenshaws', and Fred later befriends Tom Crenshaw up North and helps him overcome the racial barrier that threatens working-class solidarity. George Johnson is also depicted consistently throughout the novel. George travels north to Chicago, where he finds work in the meatpacking industry and becomes involved with union activity there. George is also one of the vehicles for Page's anti-war attitudes in the novel. Halfway through the novel, George is in Mexico, driving mules for the Army and "cursing himself for the fool he was to fall for the white politicians' talk about a war for democracy." George reflects, "A low-down trick the government pulled off. They were afraid to give the Negroes guns, afraid to train them how to fight...He was going to live to get even" (172).

Tom, charting a nice CP career up north, is eventually jailed for his opposition to the war, and Marge's husband Bob comes home from the war a broken man: " 'The things I seen over thar...Looks like I can't forget 'em.' Sometimes he would break down and sob, clinging to her, gasping out his horror... 'If I could just be sure it was for something. But it 'pears like I lost all my belief over thar in what we were fightin' for. I'd have come away, if I could. But thar warn't no way, 'n you had to keep killin' or be killed" (197). One of the novel's chapters is entitled, "Rich Man's War, Poor Man's Fight," and is indicative of Page's anti-imperialist and anti-war message. Page continually asserts industry's role in the war: "By spring, the war had touched Row Hill. Orders poured in, all mills went on double shifts or worked overtime, new cotton and munition plants sprang over night. For when food and clothing are being destroyed, along with men, on a colossal scale, they have to be replaced. And it takes a whole industry to supply armies with death-dealing weapons" (110).

As Urgo has noted, the "overwhelming force of the masculine military institution" further increases the burden on females left at home. Before he leaves for the war, Bob pressures Marge into marriage and she becomes pregnant. Marge, because she is female, is subordinate to the workings of a male-dominated socio-economic system, her life predetermined because of her gender. Through these characters, Page discusses the ways in

which war has hurt the revolutionary movement and the ways in which it increases the working-class burden.

In most cases, however, Page's representation of these issues conforms strictly to Party ideology. It is this tendency in the book that most of her critics attack. Page herself recognized this, but said that, at the time, her writing reflected what she felt was true: "When I was writing I never thought, 'This is didactic.' Generally the dialogue seemed true. I did use conversation to make a point, however, and some passages were too long...After all, people in life don't talk so long; conversation comes in bits" (Baker, 117).

Page, who held a Ph.D in sociology from Minnesota University, wrote her doctoral dissertation on Southern textile mills and used much of what she didn't include in that dissertation as fodder for *Gathering Storm.* In addition, Page had worked as a union organizer with the Amalgamated Clothing Workers Union and worked as a journalist in Europe and the Soviet Union. Most critics, Urgo included, feel the work is a thinly disguised Communist tract that reflects her education, both in the university and in union work. Despite the novel's didacticism, which seems to reflect a particular stage in Page's education and union experience, Page was able to convey sensitivity towards the Southern mill people. Much like the other Gastonia novelists, Page suggests the relative ignorance of the Southern worker to labor ideology and so manipulates characters to suggest the need for intellectual training. In many proletarian novels, it is usually an outside influence, such as a Northern or foreign organizer, who introduces the Southern characters to radical politics. In *Gathering Storm,* however, it is two native southerners who help school Tom in Communist theory. Fred Morgan, from Tom's hometown, is also distinctive as a mentor figure in proletarian literature because he is black. Tom, in turn, helps educate Marge by sending her literature like *The Jungle* and *The Daily Worker.* Page's point is to show the need for continued union activity in the South.

Page suggests this continued activity is necessary in the face of the hegemonical and geographic dominance of the mill industry. Midway through the novel, George tells Tom:

> "'The comp'ny got a strangle hold on everythin'. It owns the roof over the mill hand's head, it owns the food for their stomachs'," to which Tom replies, " 'and the food for their minds, too. That's pretty nigh the worse of all. Blessed are the poor! Turn the other cheek; Servant, love your master; and all the rest.' 'Boloney!' George agreed. 'What's more, mill hands know next to nothin' about organization. 'N the two races are suspicious as hell of each other" (261).

Class consciousness builds in each character as the novel progresses, and is usually depicted by Page through dialogue. Most critics, particularly Granville Hicks, suggested this as the novel's most glaring weakness; they felt the dialogue was just not believable. This is, in the main, true. Still, Page shows a keen sensitivity to Southern culture and dialect, and to the characters' deep connection with the land.

Page's emphasis is on folk expression, so as to show that the Southern labor movement can evolve intellectually (and ideologically) while still remaining deeply entrenched in its cultural values. Like most proletarian novelists, Page offers a somewhat romantic portrayal of the workers, relying on archetypal depictions of workers' strength and dignity. Like Anderson, Page seems to suggest that this quiet strength and patience, reflective of deep religious convictions, acts as kind of self-delusion: "Religion can be a strength because it offers so many good things to believe in - the Golden Rule for example. Many of us in the movement came from a religious background that, for all its faults and rigidities, had a certain energy and poetry that caught hold of us...But religion as it was practiced by the mill workers appeared to be a handicap" (Baker, 113).

The patience and passivity which the Church preaches blinds the workers to the harsh realities of their condition. Early in the novel, Parson Brown tells the congregation, "We gotta bear our cross in patience, and resign ourselves to God's mysterious plan" (37). Content and resigned to their fate (particularly the older generation), the workers focus on the afterlife. However, the spectre of the mill looms large over their heads:

> Red-eyed from lack of sleep Marge hastened towards the mill. She noted mechanically the numerous moving vans piled high with shabby furniture, and new families scurrying in and out of the frame dwellings. 'Looks like us people is ever movin' and rov'n. Allays lookin' for somethin' better on another hill. 'N the war's made it worse. Mills sproutin' up all over 'n families crowdin' in offa the land. (181)

Earlier in the novel, Page suggests Marge's awakening and her struggle to "square the world of realities around them with the ideas given them in religion, and failing hopelessly, tremble at the brink, daring not to go on, until events force them" (48). This struggle places Marge between her traditional beliefs, "the scorn and derision of believing neighbors and parents," and the new ideas she encounters through Communism.

Like most other proletarian novelists, Page depicts this as a necessary point of confusion in anyone's developing class consciousness. Marge and Tom's "conversion" to Communism helps them to evolve intellectually, providing them with the necessary mental framework with which to involve themselves in the fight to reclaim the South for the workers.

Page suggests that cultural survival is crucial to the workers' movement. At times though, this message is somewhat confusing. Page wavers between advocacy of southern folk expression and a feeling of its backwardness, particularly when tied to religious beliefs. However, she seems, like Anderson, to suggest that the inner spirit to which the workers' religious conviction is tied is a strength; all that is needed is reorientation of that vision and strength towards Communism. As in Vorse's novel, a sense of optimism runs throughout *Gathering Storm.* At a union meeting, Tom says the strike "will spread through all of Gaston County, the biggest textile center in the world. It must start walkouts throughout the entire Southern region! N' we'll get support from all over this country, n' from all parts of the world. You'll see" (285). Tom, Fred, and Bessie talk of Russia as the place "where the sun has already risen." The Communist message will spread across the South, much as it did in Russia in 1917, "the first break in capitalism's chain" (154). For Page, the sense of optimism is firmly rooted in the example of Soviet Russia, which provides her a framework on which she structures her message.

At the novel's close, Marge and the others are participating in a labor convention in Cleveland. Pushing further her global vision, Page mingles the Southern characters with foreign-born workers, blacks, and Native Americans, all of whom gather to discuss strategies for world revolution. Marge "could feel the lash of the wet wind, the tremor of rushing bodies...She was riding the gale! Not swept along, but deliberately, joyously a forerunner, a marshaller of the gathering storm" (374).

Page's novel is distinctive among the Gastonia novels because of its sustained focus on the possibility of global revolution, a characteristic that has won her both praise and criticism. In addition, her unique treatment of race through the formulation of black characters - class-conscious characters - is really an innovation in proletarian fiction. She handles Southern racial barriers more completely than the other Gastonia novelists, and like Lumpkin and Burke (discussed next), emphasizes the importance of folk expression and cultural survival. Throughout the Gastonia novels, but particularly in these three (*Gathering Storm, Call Home the Heart, To Make My Bread*) we see an emphasis on music, poetry (labor songs), and distinct Southern notions of community that signal the development of a native, regional art form in proletarian fiction. Since Page's focus wavers between the local and the global, however, her emphasis on these issues is not as pronounced as in Burke and Lumpkin. This sort of grass-roots reclamation of Southern culture is what makes the Gastonia novels an interesting case study in the history of radical fiction.

To Make My Bread (1932)

Grace Lumpkin's *To Make My Bread* (1932) is the story of three generations of the McClure family and their displacement from their mountain roots as a result of industrialism. Like Page and Burke, Lumpkin takes great care to imbue the novel with Southern Appalachian culture. The novel is written from the perspective of one of these "backward" mountain people.

At the time of its release, *To Make My Bread* was generally well received by Leftist critics. V.J. Jerome, a leading Communist cultural authority, felt Lumpkin should have written from the standpoint of a politicized radical rather than a "backward" mountaineer. Her perspective, he felt, and its reliance on idyllic and pastoral Appalachian settings laced the novel with too much local color. Lumpkin's tendencies in this respect conveyed an implicit sense of longing for agrarian, individualistic ways long since passed, and a subsequent dissolution of the proletarian ethos in the novel.

As we have seen, though, in the example of Page's novel, the epic scope tended to distort a novel's focus and clarity. Closer readings of *To Make My Bread* show that the McClure's mountain life is far from romantic; rather, Lumpkin portrays it as anachronistic. The McClures are poor; the children are dressed in rags, and the family nearly starves during a harsh winter. Grandpap is jailed for bootlegging, and the family faces ostracism from the local church because of it. Grandpap's steady physical and spiritual decline symbolizes the decline of Southern agrarianism. The hope for Lumpkin clearly lies with the younger generation. The burgeoning class consciousness of Bonnie and John, who is born at the novel's outset, serves as a focal point around which Lumpkin structures the novel.

To Make My Bread is an example of the proletarian bildungsroman. Besides the political awareness he develops through his own social interactions in the mill village, John is influenced ideologically by his co-worker John Stevens, who functions rhetorically as a vehicle for Communist ideology. Stevens, a classic proletarian mentor figure, allows Lumpkin the opportunity to expound didactically her political message. In her defense, Barbara Foley argues that this is almost a necessity for these authors, who might otherwise fall prey to inadvertant reinforcement of the dominant ideology through their use of a typically "bourgeois" literary form (334). However, Lumpkin is not as overtly ideological as Page except for the "satellite" sub-plots in which Stevens is a major player. While Page employs a

more schematic and paradigmatic approach in *Gathering Storm*, Lumpkin emphasizes her characters' physical and psychological confrontations with the inequities of capitalism.

Lumpkin's concentration on the development of collective sentiment and class-consciousness pushes the limits of the traditional bildungsroman. In *Strike!* Mary Vorse's journalistic approach allowed her the authorial distance needed to deal with CP problems. In addition, it provided her with a degree of objectivity with which she effectively conveyed the need for collectivity. Lumpkin's approach, despite her reliance on individual psychology and a traditionally "bourgeois" form, allows her to appropriate that form and assert a collective message. Like Vorse and Anderson, Lumpkin's characters are firmly rooted in scene and setting, which helps her assert a type of rhetoric of the "people" that is perhaps one reason for the novel's wide acceptance. As critic Robert Cantwell has said, "I can't understand how anyone could read it and not be moved by it" (Urgo, 71).

Critics on the right and Left praised Lumpkin's subject matter and the balance she exhibited in its presentation. Urgo feels the "range and types of reviews received by Lumpkin are testimony to her ability to provide multiple themes in her work" (71). The book's initial theme (as in Vorse, Page, and Burke) is the classic American fall from grace - the transformation from mountain to industrial life. In the novel's fifth chapter, an outsider named Small Hardy comes to the McClure farm to bring news of work in the mills:

> Down in Leesville, a Mr. Wentworth, a rich man, has a mill for making cloth like this...And they say whoever goes down to work there is going to be rich like him - for he started out as poor as the next one. They say out there the rivers flow with milk and honey and money grows on trees. (39)

The McClures are eventually lured from their home into the mill town by this promise of a better life and "real money. Lots of it" (40).

However, Lumpkin's depiction of Hardy is symbolic of the hardships they will encounter:

> There was something unusual about him...his shoulders had grown all awry. They were not the naturally bowed shoulders of people like Grandpap and Emma who have leaned over a plow or a fireplace all their lives. There was a hump on the left side, like another head covered over with a shirt. (36)

Hardy's physical strangeness is unnatural, as is his presence on the farm. Lumpkin equates Hardy's strangeness with the message he brings of the mills. This new life, however unavoidable for the McClures, is undeniably foreign to them, and Hardy's position as a

grotesque outsider is indicative of the spiritual alienation the McClures will face in the mills. Hardy's hump is half-hidden, like the truth of mill life that is disguised by the promise of money and a house with windows. As the family approaches the mill valley, Emma says, "It's like the Israelites a-going to the Promised Land." Grandpap, perhaps knowingly, responds, "I hope the Lord don't leave us in the wilderness for forty years" (142).

In order to retain a supplemental income (and the family's sense of identity), Grandpap stays on at the farm and tries to grind out a living. However, his efforts bring only "feebleness and discouragement," and he is eventually evicted by the lumber company that takes over Swain's Crossing. The family is now forced by economic hardship into working full-time at the mill. John and Bonnie have to quit the mill school, but Lumpkin marks this as the beginning, rather than the end, of their education.

Early on in the family's new life at the mill, Emma notices that mill life is not as she believed it would be:

> The people she had seen did not look as if they were used to many dollars. The women looked anxious about the mouth and fearful of something, and the men walked doggedly as if this was something they had to do, and they were going to get it done, simply for that reason. The young children in the pale early morning light showed up sad and pinched about the face, and thin in their bodies. (195)

Grandpap describes the mill as an "idol" that takes the young as its sacrifice, and it is the mill owners who grind workers' bones "to make my bread" (219). Lumpkin introduces her political and ideological agenda through her characters' initial impressions of mill life, thus setting the stage for her more explicit tactics in the latter half of the novel.

John and Bonnie's developing class-consciousness is set in opposition to the capitalistic individualism of their older brother Basil, who early on in the novel has left the family to pursue wealth and social standing. His hypocritical religious convictions are exposed when he marries the ugly daughter of one of the town's wealthiest citizens, all the while remaining the regular customer of a prostitute. Basil's ambition has corrupted him, but John still struggles through mixed feelings of admiration and contempt for his brother: "John thought of Basil with respect, as a person who had found something that none of them knew about, a secret of living" (183). After a time, John becomes an overseer in the mill and seeks to employ advice from Basil: "If you rise in this world you've got to rise by yourself...and not see anybody else. You've got to be practical. Then - when you've risen - you can reach down and help others" (233). John seeks to improve the workers' lot and takes his concerns for

their health to his supervisor, who rebukes him: "We've been watching you, John, and want you to get along. But if you get any such ideas as you have been expounding here into your head, you can't be of use to us" (300). Through his first-hand exposure to mill politics and its role in the perpetuation of the workers' hardships, John increasingly orients his vision towards collectivity and militant unionism.

John Stevens plays a crucial role in this transformation. However, as Barbara Foley has noted, Stevens never explicitly mentions Communism or the promise of a Soviet America. Rather, his message serves as corroboration of what John implicitly knows, and his role is therefore not as transparent as other mentor figures in the genre. Still, his role is clear:

> We must go beyond the strike to the message [Stevens says]...that we must join with all others like us and take what is ours. For it is our hands that have built, and our hands that run the machines and ours that dig the coal and keep the furnaces going; and our hands that bring in the wheat for flour. And because we have worked and suffered, we will understand that all should work and all should enjoy the good things of life. It is for us who know to make a world in which there will not be masters, and no slaves except the machines: but all will work together and all will enjoy the good things of life together. (328)

Steven's speech here is also indicative of Lumpkin's treatment of religion. Like Vorse and Anderson, Lumpkin sees value in religion's advocacy of brotherhood and community, but tends to criticize its preaching of humility and passivity. Stevens says, "they keep us in the darkness of ignorance and talk about death, to keep our eyes on death and heaven, so we won't think too much about life. We are taught that struggle is a sin" (328). John eventually rejects religion and becomes increasingly more involved in organizing the strike that encompasses the latter portion of the novel.

In contrast, Bonnie has much more trouble eschewing religion. Her spirit is parallel to that of the women in Anderson's novel. While John and Bonnie do grow together politically, their education and subsequent contributions to union activity are different. This allows Lumpkin the opportunity to make a statement about the role of women in political revolution.

Joseph Urgo feels that the physiological burden women endure because of traditional heterosocial roles form *To Make My Bread*'s dominant theme. As one can see through Myra Page's schematic contrast of Marge and Bessie, radical politics provide a forum in which feminist ideas can be effectively explored. Lumpkin, like Page and Burke, takes care to emphasize the burden of childbearing on women, and suggests that women's potential in the revolutionary movement can only be fully realized when heterosocial roles are redefined.

From the novel's outset, it is clear that Bonnie is in many ways stronger than John. She possesses an innate sensibility, a kind of woman's intuition that contrasts with John's more "male" education. John learns by tagging along with the men, while Bonnie develops her woman's "role" in the home. John becomes political through his experience as an overseer; Bonnie develops her political consciousness working with the women at the looms. Through her experience working in the mills, Bonnie realizes the importance of race relations to union success and solidarity. Her friendship with Mary Allen, a sweeper in the mill, is Bonnie's point of entry into the black community. She (like Ella May Wiggins) later comes to live in the typically black part of town, and is isolated by the white community that thinks of her as a "nigger lover": "But Bonnie went right on, for she was strong in knowing that Mary Allen and the others there needed the message as much as her people did. She could not be so selfish as to keep it only for herself and hers. She was not made in that fashion" (354). She remains steadfast in her conviction that if "we don't work with them, then the owners can use them against us" (354). Bonnie's altruism is not just a means to an end, however. While she does recognize blacks' potential contribution to the strike, she does not objectify them.

Through her activity in the union, Bonnie experiences a flowering of creativity. This symbolizes the potential for feminist liberation through radical politics and heterosocial redefinition. Her "freedom," compared to Marge's in *Gathering Storm,* is more complete, and her coming out more defined and dramatic. She becomes an inspiration to the strikers and to her brother, in contrast to Marge's minimal impact on Tom and the strike in Page's novel.

Like Ella May Wiggins at Gastonia, Bonnie is eventually killed for her role in the strike. For many critics, most notably Barbara Foley, this is troublesome and exhibits Lumpkin's failure to create a fully realized female revolutionary character. This idea is useful when considering the "success" of Lumpkin's subversion of the traditional bildungsroman. Perhaps her subversion of this form "fails" when Bonnie dies, and Lumpkin thus succumbed to pressure to focus the novel's ending (and vision for the future) on John and male leadership. Another possibility is that Bonnie's death serves as a rhetorical "hook" that could invoke a sense of tragedy and sympathy in the reader.

It is obvious that Bonnie's memory is an inspiration to John and the workers. In the novel's final pages, her sister Ora remembers:

> Thoughts of Emma came into her mind, and of Bonnie as a child in the mountains, and then a young woman when she was so bashful at the Christmas party - the time when the preacher spoke of brotherly love and the spirit of good will toward men. There was Bonnie's marriage and her

> happiness at that time, and Emma's death. She saw Bonnie taking part in the union, speaking, singing to her people who were heartened by her speeches and songs. Now she lay on the table, without life. And she had not wanted to die.There was no one who had wished more for life. And she had wanted enjoyment not only for herself but for others. For that she had been killed. But what she had begun was not ended with her: and never would be until what she had dreamed about had become a fact. (376)

Like Anderson, Lumpkin suggests that women have something distinct to offer the movement that is almost transcendent of politics. Lumpkin depicts this strength as an internalized sense rather than as an ideological theme like Page, and thus the novel thus is less overtly propagandistic.

Lumpkin's reliance on her characters' humanity makes for a visceral impact on the reader, which is perhaps a reason for the novel's wide appeal. John and Bonnie's senses of solidarity and radical politics are deeply rooted in their socio-economic experiences. Bonnie, reflecting on the words of John Stevens, realizes "she had been convinced that he had a message that was founded in the facts of her everyday life" (335). Character portraits guide the novel's politics. While in some instances Lumpkin's political agenda takes precedence over artistically consistent characterization, the novel is widely regarded as a considerable artistic achievement, and deserves full inclusion into the American literary canon.

Call Home the Heart (1932)

Like *To Make My Bread*, Fielding Burke's *Call Home the Heart* (1932) was widely acclaimed in Leftist literary circles as a work of considerable artistic achievement. The novel stands apart from the other Gastonia novels because Burke employs a single protagonist - Ishma Waycaster - throughout. The novel is thus intensely individualistic; Ishma, like Red Oliver in *Beyond Desire*, is on a quest to find a system of thought and action that gives a public purpose to her life.

Furthermore, like Red, Ishma is caught between competing social forces. Burke constructs a dialectic between the rural and the urban, between the personal and the communal, and between an outdated mountain sensibility and Communism. As did Lumpkin in *To Make My Bread*, Burke recognizes her characters' deep connection with the land and the natural world, and emphasizes the effect this connection has on their individual psychology. However, mountain life grows unbearably stifling for Ishma, and she longs for the world depicted in her books and magazines; a world that had "opened gates to a way of living so

enticing in comfort, so engaging in form, so ravishing in color, that it seemed nothing short of celestial" (11).

This conflict between old ways and the desire for something new sets the stage for the development of Ishma's political consciousness. However, this story is more of a depiction of capitalism's effects on the individual than it is an example of political revolution. The paternalist economy under which they live has made life tough for Ishma and her family, and it is her increasing burden to take care of them and the farm. All responsibility rests on her - "Six days of the week Ishma was merely a family possession, giving herself so effectually that no one suspected she was giving; so entirely that she did not suspect it herself" (1).

Ishma, "tall and strong, with no droop of the shoulders to hint of the burden they carried" (12) is described as a strong "earth mother," which is something of an archetype in the proletarian genre. However, Ishma is distinctive in that the fate of the family rests squarely on her (in this way, she is like the typical patriarch): "the girl was almost single-handed in her struggle to make the farm keep them all decently alive" (13). She exudes a typically masculine working-class strength, and her work on the farm is explained in detail similar to that reserved for describing factory work in other proletarian novels. Critics, like Robert Cantwell, have criticized Burke's failure to depict millwork in the kind of detail that contemporary Leftist theoreticians felt was necessary for a fully realized "socialist realism." In order to remain true to the Leftist notion of verisimilitude and its importance to the proletarian aesthetic, theoreticians felt that writers must take pains to describe, in as much "real-life" detail as possible, the working-class experience. Burke's depiction of Ishma's duties on the farm is distinctive because it treats the home as a workplace. Her duties and labor there are as difficult and taxing as the work a character might undertake in a factory or a mill.

Like the other female Gastonia novelists, Burke addresses the psychological and physiological burdens that capitalism places on women. External constraints - poverty, children, a marriage to Britt Helmsley - confine Ishma's spirit, and she continually seeks in nature some kind of catharthis:

> In her early years Ishma had rested sanely on her love of beauty in nature, and her unthinking union with it. She had moved largely and unconfined in that roominess of personal being. A leaf in the dawn, glittering on its twig, belonged to her as much as her shaken, clinging curls. A glance upward at an amiable, drifting cloud could ease a growing irritation in her, and sometimes her sense of grace would not abandon her for a whole day. A storm on Cloudy Knob would leave her feeling that she had taken a breath as deep as her being. Wind, curving about a ridge of silver poplars, could sweep life clean. (149)

Despite her innate connection with the land, the release she once found in nature grows increasingly insufficient, and so Ishma seeks escape from the mountain. It is clear that Burke means to address heterosocial relations, and how the characteristically masculine ethos of capitalism tends to wither a woman's potential. However, Burke does not directly address redefinition of gender-specific roles, as Page did in her schematic comparison of the Russian Bessie and the mountain-girl, Marge Crenshaw. Rather, the emphasis in *Call Home the Heart* is on self-knowledge and self- understanding. Through an in-depth analysis of Ishma's personal conflict, Burke examines the quest for meaning that underlies political activism.

Thus, Ishma's discontent serves as the impetus for her flight from the farm and into the mill town. Pregnant with Britt's child, Ishma grows increasingly aware of her burden and hopes to find some kind of emancipation. Her brother Steve's departure from the farm is the final straw for Ishma. She begs him to take her with him, but he refuses, saying:

> A woman's a woman. She's bound to carry the baggage in this life. They's no gittin' out of it for her. A man can walk off any time, but a woman kain't. God, or nature, or somethin' we kain't buck against, has fixed it that way. (149)

However, Ishma does find a way off the mountain with her old beau Rad Bailey. Fulfilling her girlhood dream of life in the big city, Ishma strikes a "bargain" with Rad. Joseph Urgo feels that here Burke "cynically ties the fate of her heroine with yet another male figure, and makes possible the charge that Ishma prostitutes herself off the mountain" (Urgo, 77). It could perhaps be argued that because of this, Burke implicitly reinforces the patriarchal structures she seeks to overturn. However, because heterosocial relations in the South at this time are clearly male-dominated, it seems that Ishma's solution is the only available one. Burke here remains true to her depiction of the social climate in which Ishma lives, and resists guiding her heroine's actions by a specific political agenda, which, as we have seen, tends to reduce characters to scientific specimens that serve as means to an ideological end.

Despite Rad's objections, once Ishma gives birth to Vennie, she decides to go to work full-time in the mills. Here she becomes exposed to Communism through her friendship with Derry Unthank, and through the work she does for the Communist organizer Amos Freer. She discovers an increasing sense of her own empowerment through her readings of Marx and other theoreticians: "A door opened for her so quietly that she hardly knew when it happened," but she still "found no relief from her incessant inner questionings" (199). Personal empowerment through a Marxist education is a theme that runs throughout all the Gastonia novels, but most of the characters come to it through an outside source, or directly

from Marxist ideology. In contrast, Burke is careful to treat Communism with a critical eye. Ishma still struggles within herself, and finds no easy answers in the Communist promise.

Like Bonnie in *To Make My Bread,* Ishma possesses an innate strength and intelligence that, when paired with her Communist education, serves as the inspiration for her reorientation to a life of political activism. However, the burdens continue to mount. Vennie is sickly and requires Ishma's constant attention:

> Vennie was somebody's job - and that somebody was herself. If a strong light fell on her, she would wince with pain. If a door slammed, or the children shouted, she would scream as if she had been struck. Her little face that had been so round at first, began to look sharp and starved, though Ishma's breast was bountiful. If anyone except her mother took her up she would shake with fear and be in such misery that it became law in the house that no one should touch her. (192)

Ishma, despite her love for the child, feels increasingly encumbered by her and subconsciously wishes for her death. Like the other female Gastonia novelists, Burke explores the burden of children as one of her guiding themes in *Call Home the Heart.*

In addition, Ishma feels increasingly burdened by Rad, who is so kind and supportive that he does not "make it easy for her to hate him" (191). She is continually looking for a way out; despite her presence in the city and in the mills, she is not fully free from what troubled her on the mountain. However, when Vennie dies, and when she pairs Rad with the young Leta, who is the type of woman Rad really desires, she is free to pursue her intellectual interests and political activism.

Ishma discovers a newfound freedom and fulfillment through working in the mills:

> She felt wrapped in a great spiritual charity that absorbed all consideration from her body. This new, external self could not be hurt. Fortunately something happened to annul her own deadening mental grip and bring her body back to life. This was merely the adventure of going to work. She surged again with restless longing and hope. (270).

She is free to renew her ties with the other mill-workers and the Communist organizers. This awakening is spurred specifically by two experiences she has in the mills. The first occurs when she witnesses the firing of her friend Ella, who was let go because of her sympathy to the union. Amidst Ella's shouts of protest, a feeling of the solidarity of shared experience sweeps over Ishma:

> "Rah fer Eller!" shouted a voice, and instantly a hundred voices were shouting"Rah fer Eller!" When they ceased, again over the room a big voice bellowed,"Rah for the Union!" Silence, except for the whirr of the machines. Then fear seemed to leave every heart, and the shout that went up was one Ishma never forgot. She looked about her. Cheeks were burning, eyes were on fire (275)

This scene, coupled with a speech by an unnamed Communist speaker, marks the beginning of collective sentiment in the novel, although Burke is careful not to overshadow Ishma's continual inner conflict. The workers gather to hear this "comrade from the North," who has come to dispel the myth of "the bogey that had been haunting their days and nights" (284). The speech itself concerns Communism, but Burke imbues it with a "populist" rhetoric that has wide appeal among the workers, and which opens Ishma's eyes to the importance of collective action. It is important to note that the novel as a whole concerns itself with breaking down intolerance to Communism through scenes firmly rooted in Ishma's character. Even though this speech comes from an outside source (as with other proletarian "mentor" figures), it is placed in context with Ishma's psychological conflict and so appears less overtly propagandistic in delivery.

However, Ishma is ultimately unable to join the Communist Party because of her inability to overcome her own racism. She saves a black worker, Butch, from a lynching, but is overcome with feelings of revulsion when his thankful wife hugs her:

> The fleshy embrace, the smoking ashes, the too eager faces shining greasily at the top of big, black bodies, filled Ishma with uncontrollable revulsion...Before she could release herself voluntarily, Ishma had thrust her off with a wild blow, followed by another. (383)

Unlike Page, Burke offers no easy answer to the problem of racism among Southern mill workers.

Embarrassed by her actions and longing for Britt, Ishma returns to Cloudy Knob with a rediscovered love for life. This failure to continue depicting Ishma's life in the union is quite atypical of the proletarian vision for the future. As we saw in *To Make My Bread* and *Gathering Storm*, typically proletarian characters seem to achieve independence from sex-role typification through their involvement with radical politics. However, Burke offers no utopian Communist solution; rather, she suggests that an understanding of self must come before significant collective or political action. Burke suggests that a woman must first resolidify her own identity before she can enact social change. The competing forces that have fragmented Ishma's sense of identity have led her to embark on this spiritual quest, and feeling she has found the answer, she goes home to Britt.

This method of closure sparked criticism of Burke by critics who felt that the novel's romantic ending undermined any political gains she might have made throughout the novel

In addition, Barbara Foley feels that the division of male-female roles that Burke worked hard to overcome is resolidified by Isma's return to the farm, resulting in yet another failure to create a fully realized feminist revolutionary hero.

To be sure, the novel presents a story of a symbolic confrontation with the effects of capitalism rather than a concrete rendering of a conversion to Communism. The novel, and Ishma's resolution in it, is clearly a story of the transcendent spirit of self-worth, fulfillment, and strength that must predate any significant political action.

Ishma's indecision, ambivalence, and conflict throughout the novel illuminates an interesting tension between Leftist writers' political goals in fiction and more traditional notions of art and character in the novel. Burke herself seems to waver between treating Ishma as a symbol of the possibilities for working-class revolution on the one hand, and creating a realistic, flawed human character on the other. In the end, Burke successfully develops the latter. Exploring this tension, we can understand the conflicting criticism that surrounds the novel. On the Left, critics praised its wide scope and were appreciative of the appearance of a "whole" character in a proletarian novel, but were somewhat disappointed in the novel's ending. Those outside the Left praised the novel's artistic depth and praised Burke's ability to evoke sympathy for the working class without overtly relying on propaganda.

Like *To Make My Bread, Call Home the Heart* is a rich depiction of mountain society and the traumatic changes it underwent as a result of increasing industrialization. Feminist issues, such as a woman's traditional role, the burden of childbearing, and birth control drive much of the novel's politics. In addition, Ishma's protracted struggle, and Burke's reluctance to give it an easy answer, reflects that this is a novel of considerable complexity and depth. Despite its unresolved ending and emphasis on the individual, the novel still conveys a deep sympathy to the plight of the working classes and to revolutionary ideals.

The Shadow Before (1934)

William Rollins, Jr's *The Shadow Before* (1934) is something of an anomaly when compared to the other Gastonia novels. Set in the northern town of New Bedford, there is little evidence outside of a few documentary links to Gastonia (his use of actual trial transcripts, for example) that Rollins wished to address the distinct nature of Southern labor relations. Rather, *The Shadow Before* seems to be more of an example of literary opportunism: Rollins seized the opportunity that Gastonia provided to create a collective

novel whose scope and politcal agenda is more oriented towards the decline of capitalism and the imminence of world revolution than it is towards the Gastonia strike itself.

Rollins was hesitant to call himself a "proletarian" novelist because of his middle-class origins (Foley, 93). His reliance on Modernist technique (particularly stream of consciousness) perhaps reflects these origins and suggests that he sought to create a radical novel with literary "merit," so that he might overcome the criticisms of those outside the Left who primarily took issue with the proletarian aesthetic. In addition, Rollins constructs a kind of topography of the classes (much like Dos Passos in the U.S.A. trilogy) by following characters like Mr. and Mrs. (mill management) Thayer and their daughter, Marjorie. Ramon Viera, an upwardly mobile Portugese immigrant, rises in the mill ranks and turns his back on his fellow workers. Harry Baumann, the mill owner's son, is caught between his sympathy for the workers and his place in the capitalist system. Finally, workers like the Frenchman Doucet and Ramon's lover Mickey, led by communist organizer Larry Marvin, struggle towards winning the strike. All of these characters' lives, and their range across classes, become intertwined with the final conflict towards the end of the novel.

The Shadow Before was widely hailed in Leftist literary circles because of its experimental style. To represent the monotony of the industrial process and its imposition on the consciousness of the worker, Rollins repeatedly interrupts the story with the "thump" of the machinery:

> And then, in the silence, rose the consciousness of a new rhythm, fainter than the memory, but sinister, relentless, allpowerful
> t*hump* throb; *thump* throb
> filling the air, swirling softly around him, sinking in to beat with the beat of his heart, to rise and fall with his breath
> *thump* throb; *thump* throb (44)

In addition to this, Rollins employs large typography in spots (for emphasis) and uses exerpts from the Gastonia newspapers during his depiction of the strike and the violence that surrounded it. Midway through the novel, he interrupts the story by writing "workers of the world unite" in several different languages.

Aside from this experimentalism, *The Shadow Before* is unique among the Gastonia novels because of Rollins's extended treatment of the upper classes. The Thayers, despite their position of privilege, are portrayed as empty people devoid of the healthy vigor that characterizes the workers. Mrs. Thayer is an alcoholic with a clear resentment towards her husband, who follows a sort of capitalist "American Dream" that is depicted by Rollins as

devoid of any real spiritual substance. Harry Baumann, the mill owner's son, is sympathetic to the workers' cause but is ultimately unable to join in their struggle in any significant way. Embroiled in an inner struggle to find something "real" (much like Ishma in *Call Home the Heart)*, Harry tries to help the workers but is ultimately unable to overcome the self-involvement and spiritual emptiness that Rollins suggests is indicative of his class' parasitic social position.

Like Anderson, Rollins is concerned with his characters' sexuality. However, their sexuality, particularly Mrs. Thayer's repressed, insatiable desire for Ramon, is used almost exclusively to reflect the decadence and debauchery of the upper classes under the capitalist system. As Joseph Urgo has noted, Ramon emerges as an "industrial Don Juan" of sorts who has sex with all of the central female characters (79). Rather than being a necessary life force, as in *Beyond Desire,* sexuality in Rollins' novel proves to be masculine opportunism and adventurism.

Mrs. Thayer, unable to cope with the repression she suffers as a result of her social position, commits suicide when Ramon rejects her. Mr. Thayer, whose real spouse seems to be the mill, continually drives his wife away. She, in turn, takes out her frustration on their mentally unstable daughter Marjorie, who eventually suffers a nervous breakdown. Mickey, a mill worker dumped by Ramon when he begins to rise in the mill ranks, is still available for sex whenever he wants it.

Women in the novel are concerned only with their relationships with men, while the men, on either side, are more directly involved with the strike itself. In contrast to the female Gastonia novelists, Rollins does not appear to consider heterosocial redefinition necessary to a society's economic realignment. He seems to have no problem with the relations between the sexes, and "presents male violence and female submission as natural" (Urgo, 79). This is somewhat puzzling, given the extended treatment Rollins gives to his characters' sexuality, and stands out as one of the novel's weaknesses. In the end, *The Shadow Before* seems to be a clear example of the male chauvinism in radical fiction and in Communist politics that many female writers of the time tried to overcome.

Even if sex is somewhat superfluous in the novel, it does serve to illuminate one of the book's larger themes, the decadence of a bourgeois system in decline. However, this theme is somewhat confused by Rollins' depiction of sexuality as power. In *Beyond Desire*, sexuality is depicted as an instinctual life force workers needed to harness in order to foster a spiritual rebirth that could help unite the sexes in their struggles against capitalist alienation. In this

sense, sexuality is power, but it is power cast as a positive aspect of working-class potential. In *The Shadow Before*, the sexuality of the upper classes is indicative of their spiritual bankruptcy. However, when Rollins describes life among the working classes, he doesn't seem to make a distinction between sexuality as act and sexuality as a manifestation of human spirit and passion. Therefore, it is difficult to pinpoint exactly what he felt was to be gained by such extended treatment of it. As Joseph Urgo has noted, the result is that sexuality in *The Shadow Before* is something of a "sideshow" that distorts the novel's message, and which "offers a clear acceptance of the kind of human sexuality one finds in Mickey Spillane" (78).

In *Beyond Desire,* the strike (and the spread of class consciousness) is secondary to sexual politics. Despite Rollins' preoccupation with them, sexuality and heterosocial relations are not the main themes of *The Shadow Before*. Rather, like Page, Rollins schematically contrasts characters to illustrate the tensions and resultant conflict caused by a capitalist system in decline. Page's comparison of Marge and Bessie shows the possibility for heterosocial redefinition through economic realignment. For Page, this is a necessary precursor to the development of international solidarity and the success of a worldwide Communist revolution. Rollins, as we have seen, sees no need for a change in the relations between the sexes. The central (and final) conflict is the clash between capitalism and class-conscious unionism.

This ideological conflict is best exemplified by Rollins' comparison of strike leader Larry Marvin (a tougher, braver version of Gastonia organizer Fred Beal) and the mill-owner's son, Harry Baumann. Marvin had worked in the mills since he was twelve, and had early on developed his class-consciousness:

> Marvin had never actually hated the owners and the bosses; never having known riches, and never really desiring much the things of this world, he was not particularly envious. But the bosses, as such, were unattractive to him...they were too patently individualistic; their aims and persons were too circumscribed by their petty ambitions and gaudy, cumbersome possessions; it was easy for him to understand the analogy of the Eye of the Needle. The workers, on the other hand, were a mass that was mankind: *Blessed are the poor-.Blessed are the meek.* (174)

In contrast, Harry only becomes sympathetic through his own feelings of guilt. An aspiring radical, he becomes aware of Marx in college but cannot overcome his class origins; he is never fully accepted by the workers. His quest for meaning is really more internally motivated than it is politically so, and he is therefore unable to move from thought to relevant political action.

Rollins portrays Harry as a typically self-involved "bourgeois" boy filled with a certain romanticism for the working classes that makes him seem naive and ineffectual. Midway through the novel, Harry and Mickey, "whose very realness sometimes left him feeling lost," are discussing the strike:

> "Why can't I be interested in the strike? I want to see these kids grow up in a world where they'll have a chance to flower, to express themselves the fullest they can." He suddenly found it hard to talk. It was hard for him to reason, and then think of the right words. "I want to see a world that isn't distorted - isn't dwarfed -by an economic system that of necessity has to stunt people's growth, the rich, burdened with too much money, as are the poor who are tied down by the lack of it." (227)

Despite his sympathy for the workers, Harry feels the upper classes, too, have their share of burdens to bear. Confronted by his father for his work among the strikers, Harry thinks to himself: "All his life he had revolted against the bareness of wealth and the life it forced on him. And why wasn't this the solution? If he could never know the fullness of the life of one working his way up, why couldn't he throw himself into the battle, the greatest struggle of all times" (206). Harry feels this burden acutely, but it is shown to be indicative of an inner conflict that has little to do with economic oppression. Rather, Rollins shows that Harry's emotional struggle is really self-indulgent, and a result of capitalism's effect on the individual psyche. By aligning himself with the working class and Communist ideology, Harry hopes to find a cause to serve which could give his life meaning. However, because of his place in capitalist society, he is unable to fully grasp the need for class-consciousness and collectivism. His failure thus serves only to deepen the emotional conflicts that brought him to strike in the first place.

However sincere Harry may appear to be, his involvement in the strike is spurred more by the thrill of the exotic than it is by any real desire to be a revolutionary. Marvin seems to recognize this in Harry. As they lie together in jail, imprisoned for their work among the strikers, Marvin thinks to himself:

> He gazed up at the ceiling, thinking of the young man beside him. He was a nice fellow, but the things didn't matter to him. He had everything. He was rich and goodlooking, and he probably danced with girls and played tennis, this was just a lark for him, a lighthearted lark; while he himself struggled on, fighting amid wretchedness, always always fighting... (291)

In an attempt to do something significant, and to prove his worth both to the strikers and to himself, Harry contemplates burning down the mill. As he lies next to Marvin in jail, thinking

that "the real story [was] right in bed beside him, more thrilling than all his old thrillers," he thinks of the spectacle it would create:

> They had the cops, the army, the courts, they had the press and the pulpit; and when they surrounded him and took him where they wanted him, there wouldn't be a murmur, the poor fools would applaud them - his own father would help imprison him, perhaps kill him. Harry, hot, threw off his bedclothes to his waist. He'd show which side he was on! he thought. If the old bastard started murdering, he'd have something to do about it, a great mill flaming to heaven...He lay very still, watching it burn. (292)

Harry wants to be a real political insurgent, like Marvin; perhaps even a martyr. Ultimately, though, Harry is unable to go through with his plans. Mentally broken by his failure, he commits suicide.

In contrast to Harry, Marvin is presented as a prophet of sorts who possesses the strength and courage with which to fight the battle successfully. Despite his alliance, both physically and ideologically, with the working classes, Marvin is somewhat deluded by his faint Christianity. Finally, though, Marvin finally eschews religion and "the dead gods" and emerges as a secular saint:

> The misery and drabness around him, which he had sensed as individual misfortunes, he now saw consciously as a whole; and seeing it as a whole, he found the substitute for his old Brotherhood of Man: class consciousness! Through class consciousness would come union; power; the gain by the worker of the product of his work; and a subsequent fullness of life. Class consciousness would combat the selfish destructive powers of individualism. (176)

In contrast to Harry, Marvin recognizes the importance of collective action. His presence in the novel, and his emotional conflicts while imprisoned, serve as the symbol for collectivism in *The Shadow Before.*

Marvin's inner struggle is reminiscient of the Christian narrative of Jesus, and his struggle with doubt and insecurity at Gethsemane. Here Rollins suggests that Communism will arise as a new religion that offers both spiritual and material security, and represents his only discussion of religion in the novel. His treatment of religion is comparitively sparse next to the other Gastonia novelists.

The symbolic contrast between Marvin and Harry is reflective of a tension that can also be found in *Call Home The Heart.* In Burke's novel, there is palpable tension between Ishma as a flawed human character and Ishma as a revolutionary symbol. The same tension is evident when comparing Harry, the bourgeois boy with good intentions who ultimately fails

in his quest for meaning and political action, and Marvin, the troubled but gifted Communist organizer, who emerges as Rollins' main ideological vehicle in the novel.

This quest for the development of class consciousness in fiction is clearly Rollins' main theme in *The Shadow Before.* However, he never fully addresses two issues, race and religion, that were of central importance to the other Gastonia novelists. His treatment of religion, as discussed above, is brief; his only statement seems to be that organized religion must be cast off in favor of class consciousness. Similarly, there is no significant discussion of race; there are different characters, mostly reflective of the large immigrant worker population in the North, who seem to represent the ethnic groups of Europe. However, there are no black characters, or any discussion of them in terms of organization. Perhaps this is a result of Rollins' decision to set his novel in a Northern town; but when paired with his depiction of sexuality, which as we have seen, suggests his acceptance of male dominance and white chauvinism, their absence is conspicuous.

The absence of these elements, and the fact that Rollins sets his novel in the North, show that while this novel is valuable when considering the attempts of Leftist authors to create new modes of expression and their attempts to subvert traditional literary form, *The Shadow Before* can really be considered apart from the other Gastonia novels.

Ultimately, the novel appears too synthetic because of its reliance on form rather than content. To an extent, all novels are "synthetic," in that they are an author's creation. However, it is apparent that the other novelists took advantage of the situation Gastonia provided to confront some of the issues crucial to Communism and political activism. The struggle in the South between an agrarian, rural mindset and the incursion of industry provided each author with material that they used to convey the effects of capitalism on the individual worker. Their response was to advocate class consciousness in an attempt to reorient the minds of the worker towards collective action. While Rollins' novel does champion class consciousness, his failure to address some of the more complex issues and how an individual mind wrestles with them makes *The Shadow Before* seem little more than an ideological exercise.

Towards a Conclusion

Admittedly, this thesis relies heavily on the value of hindsight. While my thoughts here do attempt to address Marxist criticism and proletarian fiction of 1930's America, it should not be seen as an attempt to denigrate the Leftist cultural movement or deem it a

failure; rather, my intention is to show the ways in which the movement was constrained by its own ideological limits. By doing this, I hoped this thesis would serve as part of a constructive effort towards the future of scholarship on American radical fiction of the 1930's.

More specifically, in this thesis I attempted to illustrate that proletarian artists and their predominately Marxist critics essentialized the worldview of labor over that of capital. While such essentializing is arguably central to Marxist thought, my intention was not so much to grapple head-on with Marxism as it was to show that this tendency was partly a reason for the difficulties the proletarian literary movement encountered. I want neither to nostalgically celebrate this movement, so as to create a monument to the past, nor do I wish to condemn it outright. Rather, as Michael Denning has said, I attempted to "measure the ruins" of the proletarian cultural movement in order to illustrate that individuality is a social phenomenon, and to show that individual and group identity are historically conditioned.

The fact that this cultural movement "lost" its attempt at social revolution does not mean it has disappeared. Rather, to use Denning's term, we should look towards investigating the "laboring" of culture in order to expose the potentialities that continued study of this period in American literary/political radicalism holds for understanding the way culture functions in our society, and to show that "the dialectic between work and art, labor and beauty, was [and is] fundamental to human culture" (Denning, 462).

This focus on the laboring of culture can be used to illuminate threats to the organic progression of art. I feel that such unrestrained, organic progression is crucial to the reorientation of our modern sensibility towards social justice and change. Even if most of 1930's proletarian literature did employ antithetical, antagonistic rhetoric that constrained its own progression, its value lies in its exposure of the disempowering effects of capitalism on the individual. Despite its strict adherence to the idea of the working class as the agent of historical change, American proletarian fiction of the 1930's has much to offer both the modern literary scholar (or artist) and the general reader. While there has been considerable attention given to it in recent years, the relative omission of proletarian fiction from American literary studies is conspicuous considering the dominance of cultural studies in modern academia. This thesis hopefully serves as a contribution to the re-introduction of this genre to the critical forum.

I attempted to illustrate this value through a close reading of the six Gastonia novels. Since each novel takes a different approach to the same situation, I felt that examination of each author's approach and execution provided an opportunity to take a critical look at the

way they dealt with the aesthetic and political issues that inspired their work. In addition, the craftsmanship behind these novels is, in general, reflective of many of the issues that Leftist authors and critics of the 1930's wrestled with in their attempt to crystallize a literary movement whose goal was to inspire dramatic social change. I attempted to illustrate just how complex and problematic such a goal is. I also wanted to show how, even though their goal was not reached, these authors and their work can help us to understand the social conflicts that have contributed to our sense of identity as late 20th-century Americans.

Thus, my overriding intention in writing this thesis was to illustrate reasons why proletarian literature should be re-introduced more centrally in American literary studies. I also, in general, wanted to show that artists and their work are absolutely essential to understanding the way a society works. Art, as we have all heard, imitates life; I also believe that given free reign, artists can have a key role in reorienting our sensibilities towards social change, and can be instrumental in the formulation of a new worldview that embodies the ideals of social justice.

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